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OUTSIDE EDEN

By G.U. ELLIS

EVERY MAN'S DESIRE
THE BONDWOMAN
THE GARDEN OF ILLUSION
THE HUNGRY ROAD

OUTSIDE EDEN

A Romantic Chronicle

by
G. U. ELLIS

"If young hearts were not so clever
Oh, they would be young for ever"

—*Shropshire Lad*

DUCKWORTH
3 HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.

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TO
ROY E. WILLIAMS
AT WHOSE COMMAND
THIS BOOK
WAS WRITTEN

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE dining-room of Okebourne Vicarage was a dim, quiet room, with narrow french windows. The dimness was due to the roofed veranda outside; the quietness to the vicar within. Mr. Barrymore never spoke at meal times.

He was silent now as he sat at the head of the table, his eyes half hidden by his smooth white eyelids.

He was a big-built man with a large, smooth face and fleshy jowls that just overlapped the brim of the immaculate clerical collar. The mouth was small and very precise, and the nostrils had a disdainful lift. A high forehead and glossy white hair completed the picture of a man of considerable virtue and some austerity. But when he raised his eyelids, the eyes detracted from his other-worldly appearance. They were very blue, very cold, and very distrustful; the eyes of a man who is never quite sure that he is getting all he is entitled to.

The dark furniture threw out furtive gleams, caught from the polished floor by the windows, where little pools of sunlight lay.

The windows were open and gave a view of an immaculate lawn, vivid green in the May sunshine. Beyond the lawn was a privet hedge, above which rose the white framework of a greenhouse.

At the Vicar's right hand stood a glass of burgundy. At

intervals he sipped, and when he sipped the white eyelids closed completely.

Facing each other across the long table sat the vicar's two children. They too were silent. Conversation was as difficult, in the presence of that blind face, as laughter in the presence of a corpse. Not that the children wished to talk. They had given up the idea of talking at meal times since they had first been parted for whispering. And they had first been parted for whispering at the age of four. Their two chairs had been set on opposite sides of the table. The event was fixed in their memories because it had coincided with the removal of their mother's chair from the end of the table.

That was fifteen years ago, so they had become accustomed to being parted at meal times. It was practically the only time that they were parted. They did most things together; a habit they had formed at birth, for they were twins.

They were remarkably alike.

"If you cut Tiny's hair short," Dr. Crouch had said, "and made 'em change clothes, you'd hardly know which was which."

But no one could cut Tiny's hair short. The vicar had forbidden it. So it just grew, in golden prodigality, curling about the small white forehead and little white ears, and casting gossamer shadows upon the little white neck.

Only by the closest cropping had Christopher escaped the crowning infamy of hair as curly as his sister's. The curls were there, but they were under iron restraint, except when he woke in the morning. A similar determination had saved him from the effeminacy that might have been the price paid for so strong a likeness to his sister. By refusing to look like a girl, he looked unmistakably a boy; a rather charming boy, just a little aggressively masculine in the set of the lips.

The deep blue eyes and delicate complexions gave them an appearance of virginal innocence, only belied by the lips. Such lips were meant to taste with, though they would probably always taste with discrimination.

"For what we have received, may the Lord make us truly thankful, for Christ's sake," intoned the vicar over a pair of plump white hands.

There was a reverent pause, and he added, "Amen."

His eyes opened sharply.

"I did not hear either of you say 'Amen'."

"Amen!" murmured two voices in unison.

Mr. Barrymore rose and left the room. As the door closed, brother and sister looked at one another. Then Christopher laughed. Instantly, the door opened again.

The vicar stood on the threshold. The cold blue eyes were stormy.

"If I have any more of your impertinence, Christopher, you leave this house." The door closed again.

Tiny opened her mouth to speak, but Chris raised a warning finger. For a moment or two they waited. A faint creak sounded.

Christopher smiled.

"It's all right, he's gone."

Tiny sat on the edge of the table.

"He's getting worse, don't you think?"

"He's getting older," said Chris, and lit a cigarette.

"Give me a puff."

He passed her the cigarette. Inhaling, she handed it back again, and, pursing her lips, let the smoke escape in little lazy spirals. Inside the vicarage, her only chance of smoking was by such methods.

"How much have you got?" she asked.

"Half a crown and some coppers."

She tapped her small white teeth with her nail.

"What's the least we can do it on?"

"Well, the flying will be five shillings each—that's ten bob—my half-crown will cover the 'bus to Oastington, but we've got to have tea, and I want some cigarettes—a pound's the least we can manage with."

She nodded gloomily.

"What about your watch?"

"I'd thought of that, but if it goes now, I'll have nothing to carry on with for the last week of the month."

"I'll have my dress allowance by then—come on!"

"All right!"

"By the way, what are we going to do about clothes? We must wear thick things, flying, and if he sees us swaddled up he may guess what we're going to do."

"I'll drop them out of the bedroom window, and we can just nip round to the lane and get them."

Five minutes after they had left the dining-room, the vicar passed through it on his way to the garden. The planting of his dahlias was overdue, but he was in no immediate hurry. It was Saturday afternoon, and the children would be going out. He always waited till he had seen them go before he began gardening. He could never enjoy himself thoroughly until he had forgotten that they were probably doing the same.

After taking a few turns upon the lawn, he glanced at the sky and frowned. Why he did so was not evident, since the sky was innocent of the smallest cloud. Actually, he was not frowning at the sky, but at the discovery that, despite the brilliant sunshine, the wind was in the east, and blew round the corner of the vicarage with a point like a frozen lancet.

He returned to the veranda. From one corner he had a view of a flagged path that cut the velvet lawn in two. The path ran from the front door to the door in the high wall that protected the vicarage and its garden from the world, the flesh, and the devil,

After a while, his children appeared, on their way to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Mr. Barrymore frowned. It annoyed him to see them going out, without him. Not that he ever asked them to go out with him; it was just that he begrudged the temporary abdication of his authority involved in their temporary absence from his house and garden.

It was impersonal annoyance, and impersonal annoyance always compelled him to find some particular fault on which he could focus his resentment. He was so compelled now, and found his justification in the sight of his daughter's silk-clad legs. The dress was far too short for a girl of nineteen. And Christopher wore no hat, and had his hands in the pockets of his flannel trousers. It was so typical of the modern youth—that lounging, swaggering habit and gait. He remembered the east wind, triumphantly.

“Christine and Christopher!” he called, peremptorily.

The children turned sharply, as though they had been suddenly tugged by a rope.

“Put on your hats and coats, both of you. The wind is in the east.”

They walked despondently back to the house, passing near enough to their father for him to see their despondency. Having seen it, he half-closed his eyes, that they might see his disapproval.

Once inside the house, however, the children's despondency changed to muffled laughter.

Their bedrooms adjoined, and overlooked a narrow lane that skirted the outer wall of the vicarage. The house itself was low-built and the bedroom windows were only some ten feet from the ground. Ivy and a rain-water pipe separated the low sills. The rain-water pipe was the twins' latchkey.

Chris used it now, swinging out onto the sill and getting

a good grip with hands and knees. Tiny waited to catch the clothes that lay in a heap on the ground.

"Ready?"

She nodded and stretched out her arms. One by one the garments flew up and were caught. Chris followed them.

The vicar waited patiently. At last he was rewarded. The children reappeared, muffled up as though they were about to join a polar expedition.

As they disappeared through the outer door, the vicar raised his head triumphantly and went to his bedroom to change into his gardening clothes.

For the next two hours he was engrossed with a pair of gardening gloves, a spade, and a long line of dahlia roots.

At the end of that time he was disturbed. He glanced up at the sky indignantly. The sky was empty, and he resumed his labours. Then it came again, that droning sound, rising and falling, and gaining in volume.

Again he left his dahlias. The sound was very loud now, a whirring, roaring noise that gained in offensiveness by contrast with the cloistral silence it had shattered.

Mr. Barrymore glared at the sky, and the sky glared back at him, blue as his eyes but more serene. His head was right back as far as it would go, the mouth just open, as though he waited for something to be dropped into it. Right above his head was an airplane, with scarlet body and black wings. The noise was deafening. It roared down into the privacy of his garden, beat against the walls of his house, and came back in waves from the tower of his church, just visible above the end wall.

So low was the machine that it was possible to read the lettering beneath the wings. The vicar tugged furiously at his gardening gloves. He must get that number at all costs. It was scandalous, absolutely scandalous, flying like that

right over his garden. He would make a protest: the strongest possible protest. There was no privacy and no dignity left in life.

From above, it certainly looked as though there were no privacy or dignity below; nothing but patterns—ground plans, without elevations. The vicarage looked as if it had been trodden flat by some gigantic boot. The garden wall was a tenuous red line. The church was a little squat cross, with a square lump at one end. The vicar's elm trees had become shrubs; his lawn, a little spot of green paint that someone had carelessly spilled. The vicar himself was practically invisible—nothing but a very white point on the edge of the green. Up above, his children said that the white point must be their father's face staring up at them.

The vicar tugged at his notebook and hurriedly jotted down the letters "MX—WG." The plane had passed and was rising, growing smaller. The roar of the engine subsided into a lazy drone, grew fainter and fainter, and finally died away.

"Absolutely damnable!" said the vicar, and picked up his gloves again. The wind sang in his branches, a cuckoo called from the wooded hill beyond his church, his spade clove the earth, and slowly peace came again.

Stooping, twisting, perspiring, he worked indefatigably till the last dahlia was in. Then he straightened his cramped back, wiped his perspiring forehead, and surveyed his handiwork proudly, forgetful of the east wind that blew round the corner with a point like a frozen lancet. Methodically he counted the plants, nodding his head at each in turn, his lips moving silently. When he had finished counting, he shivered.

He had a headache at teatime, a temperature when he went to bed, pneumonia the next morning; and by the end of the week he was dead.

II

Dr. Crouch heard of the death of his patient when he came to make his morning visit.

"He's just gone, sir!" whispered the housemaid.

"Humph!" said Dr. Crouch, and added, "where are the children?"

"With him, sir."

The doctor strode into the hall. He was a big-built man with a short grey beard. He had brought the children into the world and seen their mother out of it.

The vicar's bedroom was always bright and cheerful, even on the dullest day. It faced south-west, and drew in light and freshness from half a shire of rolling hills and woodlands.

This morning it was particularly bright, full of May sunshine and gay with the song of all the little birds that used the dead man's trees for their love-making.

The dead man himself lay propped up with pillows. The mouth was wide open, as though in horrified surprise. The chin and cheeks were covered with a white stubble. The muscles of the neck and throat stood out with the cold prominence of sculptured marble. The plump hands had shrunk, and clutched at a tuft of grey hair on the massive torso, laid bare in the last convulsive struggle. The cold blue eyes were wide open and staring at the ceiling in agonized rage at the indignity done him.

Dr. Crouch glanced at the bed, and from the bed to the window where the children stood.

"Run downstairs, Tiny," he said quietly.

She slipped out of the room. Chris walked to the bedside and, moving the dead man's hands, drew the nightshirt together across the bare chest.

"You shouldn't have let her see him like this, Chris," said Dr. Crouch gently.

"I couldn't prevent it. I sent her off to bed about twelve. He was fairly quiet. Then this morning she brought me a cup of tea, and I was drinking it when he . . . just sat up and stared at us, and . . . then he fell back—like that." He nodded at the figure.

Dr. Crouch stroked his beard.

"Why didn't you get the servants to help you nurse him?"

Chris looked towards the window. "You can't ask servants to do that sort of thing."

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Crouch.

There was a pause.

"Well, anyway, we had to do it. If he'd got well again he'd have said we left the servants to look after him."

"You could have had a nurse, as I suggested."

"If we'd had a nurse, he'd have said we'd wasted his money to save ourselves trouble."

The words were spoken slowly, thoughtfully. They were not meant to be an indictment of the dead, but a justification of the living.

Dr. Crouch growled.

"Humph! Well, well—run downstairs and I'll see you in a moment."

When he joined them again in the dining-room, they were sitting on the big couch. Breakfast was laid and the smell of hot coffee pervaded the room.

Dr. Crouch put an envelope on the mantelpiece. "That's the certificate," he said, "and I've arranged for Mrs. Venn to come and put things straight . . . upstairs. There's nothing for you to do now but to go to bed, both of you. But understand, no coffee or tea—hot milk and an aspirin, and bed—both of you."

Chris stood up.

"We can't go to bed yet. Aunt Julia's due at eleven o'clock."

Dr. Crouch growled irritably. "That woman!—I beg pardon—anyway, go to bed till she comes."

They heard the front door close, the sound of his feet on the flagged path, and the click of the latch as he shut the outer door. Then they were alone, with the murmur of the bees from the garden and the call of the cuckoo from the wooded hill behind the church.

Tiny stared at the little trail of steam rising from the coffee pot. Then, suddenly, she hid her face in her hands.

Christopher glanced at her uneasily. Finally he patted her shoulder. It was done rather awkwardly. They never touched outwardly.

"Don't cry, Tiny—we'll be all right."

She moved her hands and stared out of the window.

"He looked so ghastly . . . so furiously angry."

"That was only death—muscular contraction."

"Oh, I know, but . . . well, when he sat up and stared at us . . . just at the end . . . he looked just as though he was going to say it was our fault."

"If he'd lived, he probably would have done."

There was a quality of detachment in the voice that robbed it of any suggestion of levity. The words reflected a mind too accustomed to the vicar, living, to adapt itself to the knowledge that he was now dead.

There was a pause, and Tiny said, "Do you want to go to bed, Chris?"

"No. I'd like a good sleep, but not in bed." He paused and added, "It's beautifully warm. Let's take some cushions to the end of the garden and sleep there."

Two hours later Miss Julia Barrymore arrived. Her hair was grey instead of white; otherwise she was a feminine replica of the vicar.

She wasted no time. She took off her hat and coat in the hall and questioned the servant while she did so. On

hearing that the children were in the garden she raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders. The two gestures expressed her whole attitude towards her brother's children.

She continued her cross-examination:—Was the vicar laid out?—Very well, she would go up and see him:—The undertaker had not been notified?—She would do it.—Lunch was to be ready at one—cold lunch; there could be no cooking when there was so much to be done.

She went upstairs and looked at her brother; expressed herself satisfied, and took his keys from the dressing-table.

Installing herself in his study, she unlocked his bureau and looked through his papers till she found his will. Attached to the will was a letter addressed to herself. She read the will first.

She was sole executrix and residuary legatee. And the residue was the whole of the vicar's private estate, except for a bequest of £100 to the Royal Horticultural Society. There remained only the furniture which the vicar directed was to be sold for the benefit of his children, after his sister had selected such pieces, up to three in number, as she might wish to keep *memento mori*.

Miss Barrymore was gratified—but she was not surprised. She read the letter.

“MY DEAR JULIA,

“You will probably be surprised that I have left you my estate, to the exclusion of the children. My principal reason for doing so is that their mother has already provided for them. You doubtless believed that on Catherine's death her capital passed to me. It was not so. Her stubborn refusal to accept my guidance during life was characteristically expressed by her refusal to trust me after her death. By her will I enjoyed her income in trust only. On my death

the capital passes to the children. I might even have overlooked the suggestion implicit in such an arrangement: the suggestion that I was not to be trusted to preserve intact the children's inheritance from her; but she went a step further. She left the administration of her estate in the hands of the Public Trustee! You will doubtless appreciate the implication. She was determined that you, my dear Julia, the right and proper person to act as trustee, should be denied that right——"

Miss Barrymore frowned heavily. "Disgraceful!" she muttered, and went on reading:

"In the circumstances, I do not feel called upon to go beyond the provision she has already made. The children will receive from their mother an income of £75 per annum each: a sum large enough to help them in life, but insufficient to support them in idleness. I considered whether I might not add to this income in the case of Christine, but I finally decided not to do so. She would only have allowed her brother to make use of it, and he would have used it for one purpose only—to avoid working for his living.

"This, my dear Julia, brings me to my second reason for leaving the money to you. It is my wish that you should take Christine to live with you until she is of age. It is high time she was removed from the influence of her brother. It has been uniformly bad. I have no wish to loosen the bonds of affection between brother and sister, but affection is one thing and influence is another. She will still be able to see him.

"I know that you will undertake this charge, and I have little doubt that Christine will see the wisdom of accepting your help and guidance. With you she will have every comfort and refinement. On £75 per annum, she would be

able to afford neither. But should you find her reluctant, please inform her that *it is my last wish* that she should accept your protection.

Your affect. brother,
JAMES."

For a few minutes Miss Barrymore looked out of the window. Then, folding the letter and the will, she put both into her bag and, locking the bureau, went out into the garden to find the children.

CHAPTER TWO

IN the corner formed by the junction of the south and west walls, the vicar had his rubbish heap. A bank of turf, surmounted by a privet hedge, hid all that Mr. Barrymore rejected and burned. It was a warm, sunny triangle, with a dump of ashes in the middle and a plot of grass against the walls. By climbing the May tree against the end wall, it had been possible to see into the churchyard and to pretend that the gravestones were prehistoric animals crouching to the attack. Prehistoric animals had never been allowed to attack inside the vicar's garden.

It was the last place Miss Barrymore thought of in her search for the children; but, being a methodical woman, she did think of it at last, and found them.

They were fast asleep, side by side, their faces turned towards each other: two slim figures in high relief against the vivid green of the grass. Beneath each curly head was a big black cushion, and in the clear May sunshine each sleeping face looked like a tinted cameo mounted upon black velvet.

Miss Barrymore was not conscious of any such resemblance. She was conscious only of one thing. As Christine lay, with one knee drawn up, the short summer dress had ridden up the outstretched leg, shimmering in a thin silk stocking. A dimpled knee was visible, and, above the knee, a little green garter, and above the garter a narrow circle of very white flesh between the top of the stocking and the band of the green silk knickers.

That little circle of bare flesh gave Miss Barrymore a feeling of nausea.

"Christine!" she said, sharply.

Christine stirred uneasily and opened her eyes. Vaguely they looked at Miss Barrymore, and slowly understanding dawned. But before she could sit up, Miss Barrymore spoke again.

"Get up, Christine, get up! You're lying in the most disgusting position!"

There was disgust in the voice; cold, repellent disgust. Tiny blushed scarlet and scrambled to her feet. Her movement woke Christopher. Miss Barrymore frowned.

"It is a strange time to be lazying in the garden."

The children did not explain. Long years of association with their father had convinced them of the uselessness of explanations.

Miss Barrymore turned and spoke over her shoulder:

"Come along, both of you. I have a lot to talk about."

Back in the study, she took the vicar's chair: the children sat facing her on a small settee. It seemed quite natural to see her in that fumed oak swivel chair before the bureau. She looked very much like the vicar, with a skirt on.

She read the will aloud, and when she had read it she explained it, with occasional references to the vicar's letter, to refresh her memory. She told the children of their mother's will, adding hastily that as they were not of age they would not, of course, be able to touch the capital. But the remainder of the letter she suppressed, contenting herself with the remark:

"Of course, distrust breeds distrust. Your mother's lack of confidence in your father undoubtedly influenced him in drawing up his own will."

She paused, but as neither of the children answered her, she added hurriedly:

"Christopher, I wish to have a word with Christine alone."

Christopher glanced at his sister, received a nod of assent, and went. As the door closed, Miss Barrymore handed the girl her father's letter.

"Read that, my dear," she said, in a voice that was intended to be kind, but succeeded only in sounding proprietary.

Tiny read slowly. Finally she handed it back again.

"Thank you, Aunt, I'd like a little while to think it over."

"By all means, my dear child. In any case it would be better to defer your decision until after the funeral . . . in case Christopher . . . should upset you at this sad time."

Tiny swallowed audibly.

"Yes," she managed to say, and left the room. She found Chris on the veranda.

"Chris," she said tensely, "let's get away from the house."

"What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Let's get back to the rubbish heap—it's the best place for us."

He glanced at her determined little chin and stormy eyes.

"Come along then."

Back in their old sanctuary, they sat down. Cautiously, Chris turned his head. Tiny was looking straight in front of her, her hands locked round her knees.

"What's wrong, Tiny?"

"She . . . she wants me to go and live with her . . . me . . . by myself . . . not you too."

The voice trembled a little, but she did not look at him.

Chris blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Going?" he asked laconically.

She turned her whole body round, doubling her legs

under her and beating her small clenched hands on her thighs.

"Going! I'd sooner starve!"

"Good!" said Chris, and gave a queer laugh.

Tiny's lower lip began to tremble.

"Fancy you thinking I'd be such a little squirt—after all we've done together!"

"I didn't, Tiny. I only . . . well, I didn't want her to say I've influenced you."

She gave a bitter little laugh.

"You've been the only decent influence I've ever had, and . . . you don't influence me . . . I've got a will of my own . . . you never have influenced me . . . and you shan't now . . . I'll go and tell her that you haven't influenced me, and . . . that I'm not going with her . . ."

She jumped up and would have run straight back had Chris not caught her in his arms.

"Steady, Tiny. Let's have further details first."

She hesitated, but finally sat down again and told her story, giving the terms of the letter as nearly verbatim as her memory allowed.

Chris said nothing.

"What do you think of it?" said Tiny.

"It's pretty vindictive—to you, I mean. I never expected he'd leave me anything, but he'd no right to cut you out like that."

"Cut me out!—I wasn't thinking of the money. It's . . . it's the way he's tried to separate us." She broke off, and resumed more quietly: "I can't think why on earth he had us—he's never wanted us."

"Probably Mother did."

Tiny nodded.

"And how secret he kept it all—I'd no idea she'd any money at all,"

She paused, and added suddenly, "One hundred and fifty a year. Why, good heavens!—all he used to say about the expense of our education—it wasn't true. We never cost him a penny of his own money, and he could have perfectly well afforded to send you to a decent school."

She stood up, and smoothed down her dress.

"When shall I tell her?" she added.

"Not till after the funeral. We must do things decently."

Two days later the vicar was buried. Miss Barrymore had arranged everything. The grave was at the north-east corner of the church, a yard from a flying buttress that supported the outer wall of the chancel. A gargoyle looked down with a grotesque grin, but he was not grinning at the dead man or his successors. He had grinned at all; young, old, single, married, living and dead, for nearly five hundred years. At the south-east corner was another flying buttress and, above, another gargoyle, but he frowned as dispassionately as his companion grinned; frowned down at another and older grave, with headstone turning from grey to green. The weather had not quite expunged the lettering:—

"CATHERINE BARRYMORE.

Born 1880—Died 1913.

'The Lord giveth and

The Lord taketh away.'"

It was a day of brilliant light alternating with deep shadows as the cumulus clouds floated majestically across a sky of cerulean blue.

The children stood on one side of the grave: the vicar's parishioners, led by Miss Barrymore, on the other. And the children never shed a tear. The accusation was whispered between the words of the burial service; and a dozen pairs of eyes peeped from beneath reverently lowered eyelids

at the brazen young figures standing bareheaded in the sunshine.

The service finished, and the mourners moved away, leaving brother and sister alone.

"It's a bit ghastly, isn't it?" said Tiny slowly.

"The service, do you mean?"

"No—his refusing to be buried with her."

Chris stared up at the grinning gargoyle.

"It does not mean anything," he answered thoughtfully, "he over-emphasized everything. Only—well—it's such frightfully bad taste—letting the whole of Okebourne know, like that."

At breakfast the next morning, Miss Barrymore began to discuss the sale of the furniture.

"I shall keep your father's bureau and the two Chippendale tables in the hall. Everything else will be sold and I will hold the money for disbursement as occasion arises."

"All except the piano and the furniture in our bedrooms, of course," said Chris quietly.

"Oh, no—no exceptions—it will all be sold."

"But the piano and the furniture in our bedrooms were Mother's and we wish to keep it," said Chris.

Miss Barrymore raised a pair of black eyebrows.

"You are minors, and I am empowered to sell."

"Excuse me, Aunt, the only person who can sell that furniture is the Public Trustee."

The voice was conciliatory, but quite firm; unusually firm for so young a voice.

Miss Barrymore's eyes took on the expression of the dead man's.

"Do you dispute my right?"

A slight colour came up in Christopher's cheeks.

"In this case—yes."

She turned to Tiny:

"You have a voice in this matter."

Tiny raised her long lashes:

"I agree with Chris," she murmured.

Miss Barrymore stood up.

"Am I to understand, then, that you do not intend to avail yourself of my offer?"

Tiny stood up too.

"Thank you, Aunt, but I prefer to stay with Chris."

She spoke quietly, but there was an ominous trembling of the lower lip.

Miss Barrymore stared stonily at her niece.

"You have absolutely no respect for your dead father," she began—and then the storm broke. Tired out by a week's nursing and overwrought by the ordeal of the funeral, Tiny gave way. Sobbing hysterically, she blurted out scraps of sentences:

"I . . . I won't go and live with you . . . I won't leave Chris . . . and you've no power to make me."

Chris stood up and edged his way round to his sister.

Miss Barrymore drew herself up to her full height. She was pale, but self-possessed. Poor little Tiny was just quivering revolt, from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. Half blind with tears, she just stared up at the tall woman, and said everything that burned inside her.

"Do not shout at me, Christine. It's disgraceful."

"I will shout . . . and . . . I . . . I won't live with you."

"You wicked child—do you realize your father is only just in his grave, and that it was his wish—his last wish?"

"Then he'd no right to wish it . . . it was a caddish thing to wish . . . he . . . he's just trying to get me away from Chris . . . he tried while he was alive . . . and he's trying now he's dead . . . and I won't go. Chris," she turned suddenly, "don't let me go, Chris, please—let me stay with you . . . I don't want to go with her."

She was wildly hysterical now, and clung to her brother, sobbing.

"All right, Tiny," he whispered. He pulled open the door and gently pushed her into the corridor. Miss Barrymore strode forward.

"This is your influence, I suppose."

"Entirely," said Chris.

Miss Barrymore slammed the door in his face.

CHAPTER THREE

MISS BARRYMORE had her lunch alone in the vicar's study; the children had theirs in the dining-room.

It was a long, dispiriting day, and with evening came solitude. They were sitting on the veranda when she passed down the path to the outer door. The sun threw upon the lawn an elongated shadow of the tall figure. And the shadow mocked Miss Barrymore, reproducing her quick, purposeful gait as a series of Puckish leaps upon the lawn. Finally she reached the door, and without as much as a glance back, opened it and vanished. The click of the latch marred the sweet fluting of a blackbird.

"A charming woman," said Chris.

There was no answer, and he turned his head.

Tiny sat with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. The sun peeped under the veranda, as though determined to brighten the solemn blue eyes. Lazily, St. Cyprian's struck the hour of seven, and a single rook cawed its acknowledgment from the silent elms.

"Chris . . . I've got the wind up—badly."

He stared at the blackbird.

"We'll be all right, Tiny," he said gently.

"Oh, I know we will . . . but . . . I dread to-night . . . last night . . . I . . . kept thinking I heard him . . . tiptoeing along the corridor, like he used to when . . . he wanted to catch us reading in bed."

He glanced at her quickly. The long silky lashes were

blinking and the pretty lips trembled. He put his hand on her arm.

"Don't, Tiny—you're . . . you're the most pathetic-looking thing on earth when you cry."

She laughed, a rather tremulous laugh, that had the sound of tears in it.

"I'm making an awful mess of things, aren't I?" she said; and laughed again, after which she cried a little.

Chris rubbed his chin. Then, suddenly, his eyes brightened.

"Tiny, we'll camp on the river to-night."

She stopped crying instantly, and the blue eyes grew very round.

"Chris! What a marvellous idea!"

"And we'll have sausages and fried bread for supper."

She raised her eyes to heaven, and when she raised her eyes a little crescent of white showed beneath the deep blue irises, giving her the look of a Madonna.

Their father had not liked sausages and fried bread, and what he did not like did not appear at his table. But he was dead now, and his death had suggested sausages and fried bread. In time it would suggest many more things: at present, it had effected no greater change than a change of diet.

But the sausages changed everything. They were food and food was life, and life just then needed some plain assurance that death was an impertinence.

Tiny jumped up.

"And we'll have tons of coffee, and we'll take our bathing costumes so that we can have a swim in the morning; and we'll get some chocs and cigarettes and bacon and . . . oh, Chris . . . we're going to have a simply marvellous time."

The gold had turned to a fiery red as they passed through the door in the end wall, and gained the churchyard. Tiny

had changed into an old white skirt and a sweater with a turn-up collar that just touched the small ears. She wore neither hat nor stockings, and carried a shopping basket in one hand and a long French loaf under her arm. Chris staggered under a load of blankets and cushions, with an old pack on his back.

The first bat flitted above their heads as they made their way among the tombstones towards the east wall of the churchyard. At the gate they paused, and Chris suggested a cigarette.

They were on the boundaries of the vicar's sphere of influence. Beyond the wall, a path dropped down over a green shoulder to the valley where the river sang. It was singing now, softly, mysteriously, with little trills and gurglings; singing in the darkness under the shadow of the hanger.

Eastward, the sky was a placid sea, lapping an island of coral cloud, tenuous, dreamlike, lit by the beacon of a single star.

Silently they watched the coral island dissolve and the beacon star grow brighter. From the shrouded beeches an owl sped through the dusk, and the wavering hoot came back across the little valley where the river sang.

"The Peace of God that passeth Man's understanding."

Tiny turned her head quickly. In the failing light she could just see his face, and half expected to see him smiling. But he was staring at the beacon star.

"Why did you say that, Chris?"

"I was thinking of all the times he's said those words, and to-night is the first time they've ever seemed to fit things." He paused, and added, "Come along."

They passed through the gate.

By the river's brink, they dumped their luggage. The river was almost black now—black, with a glint as of a

polished surface. The wooded hill rose up from the farther shore, like a black wall. On the water a drift of mist eddied.

"Wait here. I'll fetch the punt up to you," Tiny nodded.

The minutes passed slowly. In the wood, a nightjar was sounding his eerie, reeling note. She sat down and slipped her hands up the arms of her sweater. She was not frightened now. She would never fancy she heard his footsteps here. For this had been Catherine Barrymore's territory, as it had become her children's. "Outside Eden" she had called it. Tiny remembered the words so well. They were almost the only words she could remember—"Come along, you babies, before your Father sees us. The river is outside Eden."

A faint splash sounded, and out of the gloom the punt appeared. The blunt bow nosed into the yielding flags with a soft rustling. Tiny jumped up.

The boat was rigged with camping irons—stanchions that fitted into sockets and looked like big croquet hoops. Lashed along the tops of the irons was the camping cover. It was an old boat, but it was their own. It had taken them nearly a year to pay for it, at the rate of 2s. 6d. per week. It had been bought from Mr. Bantrim, the landlord of the Anchor Inn, a mile down the river. It had been housed in a little inlet that irrigated the vegetable garden of Joseph Botterill, the shepherd. The stanchions had been made by Ramage, the blacksmith. The children had not been allowed to pay for them. They were only bits of old iron, Ramage had said, and weren't wanted. The camping cover had been supplied by Semphill, the foreman of Three Elm Farm. The children had not been allowed to pay for it. It was only an old rick-cover, Semphill had said, and it wasn't wanted. The children lived by the things that were not wanted.

The vicar had never known of the punt's existence. It had not been difficult to keep it secret. The cover, when lowered, draped the boat from stem to stern. By practise, the twins had learned to lower it in thirty seconds. In practise, they always did so when a figure appeared from the direction of the village.

In ten minutes the cargo was stowed and the cover lowered. Then a candle was lit, and they smiled at one another. The canvas looked warm and substantial in the yellow light. The cushions were hidden by packages; biscuits, chocolates, bread, bacon; and on a tin plate that gleamed in the candlelight lay a dozen pale, glutinous, magnificent sausages.

Tiny sat back on her heels, her hands in her lap. The candle flame flickered and danced in minute pinpoints of reflection in the very centres of the deep blue eyes. On the white forehead were little web-like shadows of the curly hair. Behind her loomed a grotesque silhouette, sprawling across the warm canvas.

She laughed gaily. "Let me get at those sausages!"

"Not so fast—we're going to the Anchor first."

"The Anchor!—are we really?—oh Chris, let's get some brandy to put in the coffee. I've never tasted coffee with brandy in it."

"It spoils the brandy," said Chris, and raised one flap of the canvas to give himself paddling-room.

The light shone out upon the water black and polished. The boat slid silently downstream.

"Tiny!"

"Yes?"

"We're going to London to-morrow to see the Public Trustee and to find a flat."

Tiny nodded.

"Yes, dear, of course.—I suppose we've got the money?"

"That's why we're going to the Anchor. I'm going to borrow £20 from Bantrim."

She tapped her teeth with her nail.

"Dr. Crouch would have lent it to us."

"I know—but he'd probably have tried to persuade us not to go."

"How long shall we be away?"

"As long as £20 lasts," said Chris, and drove the paddle deep into the black water. Tiny gave a little excited laugh.

"Shall we stay at a hotel?"

"Of course."

Again the blue eyes were raised to heaven. "Chris! How absolutely marvellous!"

The punt rounded the bend and ahead two red squares shone side by side in the darkness.

"The Anchor," said Chris, and added, "By the way, who's going to tackle Bantrim, you or me?"

"You'd better let me. I can look much more pathetic than you."

He laughed and steered the boat to the landing-stage. The red squares had now resolved themselves into two red blinds. The windows were open, and the sound of gruff voices mingled with the rattle of tankards. Shadows moved upon the blinds, and as the children stepped ashore a burst of laughter and clapping disturbed the quiet darkness.

"They're playing darts," said Chris, as he made the painter fast.

"I'll wait here," said Tiny. He nodded and left her.

The approach to the Anchor was always rather a delicate matter when Tiny accompanied her brother. When it was light it didn't so much matter. She was seen instantly and the voices inside the bar sank in tone and changed in idiom. But when it was dark, Chris had to whisper to Mr. Bantrim, who in turn whispered to his wife, who came and whispered

to Tiny, who followed her to the side door and into the private sitting-room. Once there she was safe and could remain chatting to Mrs. Bantrim while Christopher played darts. A cachou sweetened their breath for grace at the vicar's dinner-table. Mr. Bantrim alone experienced a sense of shamefulness at these proceedings. He was a middle-aged, powerfully-built ex-naval warrant-officer, with a bustling manner and a pair of big, grey, anxious eyes. To see Christine anywhere on the premises of the Anchor during licensed hours made him feel as uncomfortable as if he had found an admiral in the cook's galley.

"This way, my dear," whispered a voice, and Tiny discerned the shadowy bulk of Mrs. Bantrim.

Chris was already in the private sitting-room with Mr. Bantrim, who stood up smartly when Tiny entered. But the grey eyes gave her a look of mute reproach as she sat down on the shiny horsehair sofa.

"I'll leave you for a bit, Tiny," said Chris, "I must have one game of darts. Come on, Bantrim."

Chris won at darts, and Semphill moved to the bar.

"What will you 'ave, sir?"

"Look here—we're off to London to-morrow and we shall only come back for the sale. This'll be the last time I'll be in here. So if you wouldn't mind—I'd like you all to have this one with me."

He turned to the bar, where Bantrim stood uneasily: "Bantrim, fill up the three-handled mug and we'll pass it round."

Bantrim hesitated, sighed, and retired to the back of the bar; a region of high light and big barrels on trestles, with shelves gay with yellow packets of cigarettes and inverted bottles of whisky, gin, and brandy, each with a little metal bucket hanging beneath the neck. It was the one spot of colour in drab lives—in dull lives, it was the one excitement.

As Chris waited, he glanced round the room. By the bar counter were spittoons, a line of them, copper-coloured and filled with sawdust. Against the wall hung the dart-board, pocked with a myriad tiny punctures. In the small bay window was a rough-hewn oak table, scarred and notched; and behind, a square of night, with a wall of trees just discernible against the lingering afterglow. From a beam hung an oil-lamp, casting concentric rings of light upon the sooty ceiling. Tobacco smoke hung in pale, acrid drifts, that eddied when a figure moved.

As the landlord set the massive three-handled mug down upon the counter, he whispered to Chris:

"After this one, sir, please go into the private bar; there's another gentleman there—and that's where you ought to be."

Chris smiled.

"I'm all right," he said, but he glanced across the counter to where a raised panel gave a glimpse of Mr. Bantrim's ward-room.

He could just see the face of the occupant, and he liked it. Involuntarily, it made him smile, though why he did not know. The real cause was the exaggerated curve of the black eyebrows, that gave the whole face a look of profound surprise, the more noticeable by reason of the dark impassive eyes and thin, straight mouth.

At that moment the stranger was staring moodily at a pewter tankard on a table in front of him. Then he moved, and his head and shoulders came forward. Chris experienced a slight shock—the left coat-sleeve hung empty from the shoulder.

The tankard was drained, and the face vanished behind the partition. Christopher raised the heavy mug carefully:

"You first, Semphill!" he said.

Semphill received the vessel gravely and raised it to the level of his chin.

"The very best o' luck to you and Miss Christine, sir," he said.

His face vanished, to reappear, moustache iridescent with little diamonds of froth.

The next pair of hands received the vessel and the formula was repeated.

Finally the cup came to Chris.

"The best to all of you," he said, "and—thanks awfully for all the things you've done for us."

He bent his head and drank, blinked his eyes, and reappeared. From the door, a pretty voice said:

"Oh, Chris!—could I?—just a sip—for luck!"

Everyone turned. In the doorway stood Tiny. She looked rather small in the short white skirt and sweater. There was colour in her cheeks and a sparkle in the big blue eyes, and against the night her hair shone golden in the lamplight.

"Miss Tiny!" protested Bantrim.

But Tiny silenced him with a look. Glancing at the group beneath the lamp she smiled.

"May I?"

There was a shuffling of feet, a rumbling of voices, and a turning of heads.

"Just a sip!" pleaded Tiny. "To . . . to wish you all luck before we go."

Semphill swallowed audibly.

"You see, missie—we've all, as it were, 'ad our noses in it."

Tiny laughed.

"Mine's ever so small—it'll go in, easily."

She ran to Chris, who still held the vessel.

"Please, Chris!" she looked up sideways.

Chris sighed, and surrendered his trust. As he did so, he glanced across the bar counter. In the opening framed

by the raised panel was the face he had seen before. The black eyebrows were still more arched. It was too late to warn Tiny. She held the great cup firmly and peeped over the brim and smiled.

"We're frightfully sorry to leave you all," she said. "Chin, chin!"

The blue eyes vanished, and the curls clustered round the rim of the old mug. When the face reappeared, the pretty mouth was grimacing.

"I . . . I don't care much for the taste of it!"

A roar of laughter made all the glasses on the counter ring. Mr. Bantrim looked distraught.

"Miss Christine!"

"All right!" said Tiny, "we're going now. Goodbye—everyone!" She put out her small hand.

There was a general movement, and even the mug was forgotten. Mr. Bantrim moved his head agitatedly to and fro each time Tiny's small hand vanished into a massive brown fist. But he could say nothing. His voice would not have been heard amid the general chorus of well-wishing. Finally he gave up worrying and waited, watching the two slim figures in white, laughing and talking, half-hidden by corduroys and tobacco smoke.

They were at the door now, and stood for an instant side by side, silhouetted against the night, both laughing, both young, both unforgivably irresponsible.

Then they were gone, and in the black doorway a single star shone.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

BEHIND the curtains of the big bay window of The Laurels, Miss Ganet sat in black silk and sequins, watching for the children's return. Facing The Laurels was a dwarf elm tree upon an islet of green grass between the church and the Stag Inn. The 'bus from Oastington stopped by the elm tree and the children could only return to Okebourne by the 'bus from Oastington.

She shared her vigil with the Misses Gribble, two elderly maiden sisters who lived in a small thatched cottage under the shadow of St. Cyprian's. They were both shortsighted, but they both wore glasses and missed nothing.

It was they who saw the new vicar arrive. He got off the 'bus one morning after the children had been gone a fortnight. He was followed by his family, and as the Misses Gribble watched they began to wonder if he would ever cease to be followed by his family. First there came a girl of eleven, then a boy of twelve (the Misses Gribble assessed the ages approximately): then there came a shock—a girl of about Tiny's age was the shock. She wore an ultra-short skirt and exhibited a pair of knees that made the rheumatism throb in the knees of the Misses Gribble. It was a bright, sunny day, and the light seemed to exaggerate the obtrusive shamelessness of her appearance. The Misses Gribble could even see the pair of small green ear-rings in her little ears,

and blinked at the plain gold armlet that encircled the bare, brown arm. And how black her hair was!

"My dear—she simply can't be a clergyman's daughter—she's a gipsy!"

Then came a young man in plus-fours, almost as dark as the girl. He was smiling broadly.

Next came a dog—a hideous bull-terrier with pink eyes, who half fell, half jumped off the 'bus and then proceeded to roll on his back upon the grass. The elder Miss Gribble instinctively snatched up a little Pekinese who lay on a cushion, looking biliously into space.

"What a brute of a dog! It won't be safe to take Jubby out now."

After the bull-terrier came a tall girl, stylishly dressed in a dark grey coat and skirt. The Misses Gribble estimated her age at thirty.

"But, of course, she's probably older. They all try to look young, nowadays."

And lastly came a tall man. He was the worst of them all. He was disgracefully untidy, to begin with. An old pair of grey flannel trousers and a badly fitting tweed coat with bulging pockets, a crumpled soft collar with a ragged bow-tie, and an old felt hat with the brim turned down, made up an *ensemble* that sent cold shudders down the Misses Gribble's Jaeger-clad spines.

"My dear, he's only one arm," said the younger Miss Gribble.

"Humph! you know what that means—he's been in the Army—and you know what *that* means!"

The 'bus drew away and the human freight it had deposited all began laughing and talking. The new vicar himself was almost hidden. All that the Misses Gribble could see was a small, pale, cleanshaven face, that smiled too.

And then the last infamy was committed. Headed by

the gipsy and the young fellow in plus-fours, the whole family moved off and went straight into the Stag Inn.

When the Misses Gribble recovered, they carried the news, and Jubby, to The Laurels.

Miss Ganet listened in stony immobility. As the narrative finished, she said :

“ In future, I shall worship at St. Jude’s.”

“ But that’s not in our parish, dear.”

“ Our parish went when the dear vicar died,” said Miss Ganet.

Jubby hiccoughed and was put out into the garden.

The next afternoon, the children got off the ’bus from Oastington. Miss Ganet saw them. They were both laughing, and Tiny had had her hair bobbed.

“ Fortunately, they will be leaving to-morrow,” said Miss Ganet to the Misses Gribble. “ It’s the sale, and I heard from their aunt that they are going to live in London.”

“ With her? ”

“ With her!—that would be doing what their father wished ! Oh, no—they are going to live in a flat in Fulham—they call it Chelsea—but it’s Fulham really.”

Jubby hiccoughed again, but there was not time to put him in the garden.

“ Please don’t apologize,” said Miss Ganet, “ a little thing like that is nothing in these sad times.”

II

The sale was held in the dining-room. Nearly everyone in Okebourne attended.

The children locked themselves into the dismantled kitchen. To have watched the sale in the dining-room would have been to be watched themselves by everybody. In the kitchen they could see unseen. There was a sliding

panel between the rooms, and in the panel a small knot in the wood, which could be removed quite easily. They had often removed it in the past, when their father was entertaining a select number of his parishioners to tea.

They had removed it now, and were taking it in turns to squint through into the crowded room, where everyone was prodding and handling furniture that was not their own. It was Tiny's turn. She stood with her eye fixed to the hole, her hands lightly resting against the panel. It was possible to gauge her emotions by the movements of her hands; when the bidding was close, the fingers beat gently against the woodwork, when it was slack, the hands drooped slightly from the small wrists.

Suddenly they clenched tightly and relaxed again, and he turned her head quickly—her eyes like little blue moons.

"Chris—there's a fellow and a girl in there, about our age—I'm sure it's the Goolans."

She turned back to the peephole again and continued her description of events in short, staccato sentences:

"The son looks delicious—rather dark, and all nice and clean about the face."

"What's the daughter like?"

"Not bad."

"Come on—it's my turn."

Reluctantly, she resigned her place, and Chris peeped through. For a moment there was silence, then he looked back.

"I say—the girl's rather wonderful, isn't she?"

"Not bad," said Tiny, for the second time.

But he did not hear her, he was concentrating all his attention upon the scene in the next room. The two people under scrutiny stood quite close to the panel. They were plainly only interested in the sale as spectators. The

girl kept turning her head to speak to her brother, and each time she did so Chris caught a glimpse of a dainty profile, embellished by a little nose that was just the slightest degree tiptilted.

It was not Chris's intention to eavesdrop, but as he watched, the girl stepped back a little, and he heard her say:

"The lawn will be simply perfect for tennis!"

"And the house is ideal. There's tons of room for all of us, and room to spare for putting people up. It will make a wonderful head-quarters."

They moved away and were hidden by the crowd about the auctioneer.

"Did you hear?" said Chris, drawing back.

Tiny nodded.

Moodily, he wedged the knot into the hole again.

Tiny sighed. As he unlocked the door, she said: "Chris—shall we . . . shall we just go into the dining-room? Perhaps if they saw us they might speak to us."

He did not answer for a moment. Then with a shrug of the shoulders, he said: "What's the use, anyway? We're going away. It's just our luck that they've come, just as we're going." He paused, and added, "In any case, they're clergymen's children, so they're probably frightfully conventional."

"Rot, Chris!—you've only got to look at them to see they're absolutely modern."

He laughed.

"I know they are. It was only sour grapes that made me say that. But in any case, if they saw us I don't suppose they'd speak. They've probably heard all about Father and think we're a couple of 'mutts' to have put up with it. Come on!"

They had their tea on the river, and returned to find the

vicarage empty save for the auctioneer and Miss Barrymore's solicitor, Mr. Grimditch, who sat in the dismantled dining-room over a sheaf of papers.

"Ah!" said Mr. Grimditch, as they entered. "It has been a good sale—quite a good sale—er—approximately £300 in all."

"How much are we allowed to handle now?" asked Chris.

"Well—I talked the matter over with your aunt, and—in all the circumstances—of your moving, etc., she agreed to the sum of £100 now, in addition to the £50 already disbursed. The balance—er—of course—will be held till you are of age."

"Thank you," said Chris.

There was further discussion, and finally Mr. Grimditch agreed to pay the cheque into the account which, armed with a letter of introduction from Dr. Crouch, Chris was opening with a bank in Chelsea. Shortly after, the two men left together, and the twins were alone in the carpetless, echoing house.

The last excitement was over; the last activity had died away into inertia. There was nothing more to do but to wait—but for what they waited, neither knew.

They had a house to go to and a little money to back them up—beyond that, they had nothing except themselves.

They wandered disconsolately into the garden, but the immaculate green lawn mocked them. It would be marked out for tennis in a day or two, and the Goolans would be playing where they had hardly been allowed to walk.

The house, too, mocked them. They began to realize what a home it could be with the right people in it.

"Expect those two will have our bedrooms," said Tiny.

"I expect so. And they'll probably make a wonderful room of the drawing-room."

"It was so wonderful when Mother had it. I can just remember it, in the winter, when there was a fire, and she used to play the piano."

"Come on—let's get back to the punt."

They had sausages again for their supper, but the magic had gone out of forbidden foods. By the time they had cleared away and lit the candle, depression had settled upon them like a pall.

The boat was moored beneath the shadow of the wooded hill. Shorewards, the cover was lowered, but they had drawn up a section on the other side, and as they lay smoking they could see the scattered lights of the village on the high ground above the valley.

The chimes of St. Cyprian's rang out: nine sleepy strokes that seemed to hesitate before they sank down to the valley and drifted away with the river, to the wide world beyond. The candle flickered, and a moth floated in through the black gap. Tiny caught it, held it gently, and smiled at the little black pinpoints of eyes in the tiny head. Leaning across, she raised the cover on the landward side and set the captive free again.

"You're too soft hearted, Tiny," said Chris gently.

She glanced down the boat to where he sat on the cushions facing her. "Am I?" she said smiling.

"Much too soft hearted. And we've lived softly, all these years—it's not going to be so easy now—you know that, don't you?"

She did not answer at once, but sat, passing her hands up and down her pretty legs, and staring at the candle.

"I'm not worrying about that, Chris, only—it's funny—I've only just thought of it—but one day—we'll both probably marry, and all this—it'll be washed right out, won't it?"

He nodded moodily.

"I suppose so. Nothing lasts."

She nodded gravely and then she yawned.

"Shall we go to sleep? I'm ever so tired."

He lowered the flap and the strip of night vanished. Tiny arranged the blankets.

"Come up this end with me, Chris. I feel a bit miserable."

He smiled, and, crawling over to the cushions, sat down beside her. Together they drew the blankets up to their chins.

"How old should you think he was?" said Tiny, staring at the candle flame.

"Who?"

"Er—why, the brother."

Chris turned his head slowly.

"What's it matter? We shan't see them again."

"No, I know, but I just wondered. I should think he's about twenty-three, shouldn't you?"

"Oh, damn him!" said Chris, and blew out the candle.

In the darkness he heard her sigh. Awkwardly, he squeezed her arm.

"You've hardly met any fellows yet, Tiny—you don't want to fall for the first one you see."

"I haven't fallen for him, but—well, I think he really is rather delicious," she paused, "and anyway, you've got nothing to shout about—you stared through that hole at her as though you were Peeping Tom."

There was a pause.

"Well, she really was rather wonderful," he said musingly.

Tiny smiled.

"You don't want to fall for the first girl you meet," she mimicked.

He laughed.

"That's true—it's men I want to meet—not girls—at least not yet."

She lay down, and after a moment or two, Chris did the same. The water lapped drowsily against the punt's counter. Ashore, the bracken rustled and a puff of wind set the leaves whispering. Now that the light had vanished, the canvas cover was no longer opaque, but glowed faintly, showing the black lines of the stanchions. Chris lay on his back. He could hear Tiny breathing evenly.

"Tiny!" he whispered.

There was no answer; only the lap of the water and the scurrying of some little animal among the bracken.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE day broke in a faint mist upon the river and fields, but by six o'clock the sun had drunk the valley dry and was beginning to steal the dew from every blade of grass. In the fields, a line of cows moved slowly towards the river bank, with soft, sulky eyes and wet nostrils, from which the warm breath rose just visible in the fresh morning air.

The punt was still shrouded from stem to stern. Moored beneath the overhanging trees, it faced a shallow pebbly bay, formed by a break in the bank. Slowly, the cattle moved down to the bay, and, standing in the water, stared at the canvas shape by the farther shore. One, less philosophic than the rest, stretched out her neck and lowed lazily. The canvas shook and bulged. Then it parted, and out popped two heads, golden, but tousled. The cows stared, and two pairs of sleepy blue eyes stared back. The unphilosophic cow lowed again and was answered by a burst of laughter. Whereupon, with a look of sulky reproach, she drew back, gave a contemptuous whisk of her tail, and led her companions back to the field again.

Tiny looked down at the water. It was so still that it was as faithful as a mirror, and so blue that it was far more flattering.

"Chris! Now I've had my hair cut, I'm just like you, aren't I?"

Chris regarded the two mirrored faces thoughtfully.

"I wish I could get a bit more hairy about the face," he muttered, "I don't want to look like you."

"Thanks very much! Now take your costume and go ashore."

Five minutes later he joined her on the boat's counter. The river looked so blue and calm that it seemed almost a violation to plunge into it. The sun warmed their bare limbs, and a breath of wind came ruffling the water and blurring the reflection of the young bodies. The wood was alive with the May music of innumerable birds. The east wind had gone—come and gone, taking the vicar with it. From the hazy distance a cuckoo called. It was Spring.

Tiny's slim body tautened. Raising her arms, she flung back her head.

"Chris—our first day of freedom!"

"And one hundred and fifty pounds per annum!"

"Oh!—all sorts of wonderful things are going to happen to us!"

Chris closed his eyes.

"For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful!" he said, and raising his arms, plunged into the river.

"Amen!" cried Tiny, and plunged after him.

They came to the surface together, and laughed and blew bubbles, and splashed, iridescent showers that fell upon each other's heads. Then, they began to swim, their white arms flashing out of the water to catch the sunshine, their heads half hidden and only their eyes laughing.

Suddenly Tiny stopped and trod water.

"Good heavens!" she gasped.

"What's—s'matter?" bubbled Chris.

"I've packed the towels!"

Chris burst out laughing. As a result, he sank. When he re-emerged, Tiny laughed too. She also sank. When they had both finished coughing, Chris said:

"There's only one thing for it. We'll put on our shoes

and run back to the house. We'll be almost dry by that time."

Within the wood it was cool, and they challenged each other to a race. The narrow path was still carpeted with the dead fronds of last year's bracken, and wound its way among the smooth boles, rising and dipping, as it followed the irregular shape of the hill. And as they ran, laughing, broken shafts of sunlight came through the trees, striping their white limbs with flickering bars. By the time they found the towels, they were almost dry.

As they re-entered the churchyard from the garden, St. Cyprian's was striking seven.

"Shall we?" said Chris, and nodded towards the church.

"Oh yes—we'll never be able to again."

They left the path, and, passing among the tombstones, came to their mother's grave. They had been too young when she died to remember much of her. But they remembered that she often laughed, and as their father never even smiled she had become the symbol of the happy side of life, even though that symbol was expressed in the form of death.

But there was another reason that had led them to treat her grave as a sanctuary. Once behind the chancel wall there had been no danger of their father's intrusion. He had been there once, to see that the epitaph had been correctly engraved. Having thus assured himself that all who read would receive official notification of his bereavement, he had left the weeds to grow unchecked, and withdrawn to cultivate his roses and his dahlias. But the grave had its ritual and the children performed it now. Standing beside the headstone, they read her name, read when she was born and when she died, and lastly, the sententious epitaph—

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."

Just behind them was the scar of new-turned earth, already sinking down upon the dead man.

With a little spring Tiny sat down upon the top slab of a massive oblong tomb. It had been raised by the relict of some forgotten eighteenth-century worthy—worthy of such a memorial. But time had expunged his name and defaced the elaborate scrollwork though still a stony cherub blew on a chipped trumpet just visible between Tiny's white legs.

He joined her, and they sat, swinging their legs, their white shoes tapping against the stopped ears of the dead.

"I never used to think of death at all, till he died," said Tiny suddenly, "and then it seemed so horrible—unless there was something else to follow."

"That's because he never got anything out of his life when he had it. He wasn't happy; he didn't know how to be; and we do, and we're going to *live*, Tiny."

She sighed.

"I suppose we are," she said, doubtfully, and sighed again.

"We haven't started very well, have we?" she added, "going away just as the Goolans have come."

Before Chris could answer, another voice broke in:

"Good Lord!"

They both looked up sharply. By the flying buttress stood another brother and sister, the two who had been visible through the hole in the panel. Tiny blushed scarlet.

"Oh!" she said faintly, and rolled sideways over the edge of the tomb, disappearing on the farther side.

Chris opened his mouth wide.

"Er . . ." he said, and slipped down from the tomb.

From the other side, Tiny's golden head rose slowly, till the blue eyes were just visible over the top of the aged stone.

"Good morning!" said the young man whom Tiny had described as "delicious."

Tiny smiled, tentatively. "Good morning," she murmured.

The girl spoke to Chris.

"You're the Barrymores, aren't you?"

"Well—yes."

Tiny's chin appeared above the edge of the tomb. Very carefully, she rested her elbows on the stone slab and leant forward:

"And you're the Goolans, aren't you?"

The delicious young man laughed.

"Yes—some of them."

They all laughed.

"We've heard a lot about you two," said the young man to Tiny. She met his eyes a little uncertainly. But she smiled, and, slipping her towel round her shoulders, sidled round the edge of the tomb, till she stood beside her brother.

"Who have you heard from?" asked Chris. Though the statement had been made by the brother, Chris's question was addressed to the sister.

And the sister answered:

"From Miss Ganet."

Tiny forgot all about holding her towel. Standing bolt upright, she said:

"Miss Ganet's an old mischief-maker!"

The young man frowned at his sister.

"It wasn't Miss Ganet, Miss Barrymore," he said, hurriedly, "it was Dr. Crouch."

Tiny raised her blue eyes to heaven. "Oh, Dr. Crouch!"

The young man explained: Their father had called on Dr. Crouch: he wanted to know something about his new parish, and the landlord of the Stag had said that Dr. Crouch was the only reliable person in Okebourne. Their father had liked Dr. Crouch and had brought him back to dinner at the Stag.

Once they got Dr. Crouch inside the Stag, they had won by sheer force of numbers. Then he had started talking

about them, the Barrymores, and finally, they, the Goolans, had decided to go to the sale.

"We thought we might perhaps see you, but of course we didn't."

Chris and Tiny exchanged glances, and Tiny took up the story from their side.

As she finished, the young man exclaimed: "Why on earth didn't you come and speak to us?"

Tiny glanced uneasily at Chris. The sister saw the glance.

"Didn't you like the look of us?" she said.

Chris laughed.

"Well, as a matter of fact, we did rather, only there were a lot of Okebourne people in the room, and—well, you don't know Okebourne people like we do."

"We've heard a good deal about them from Dr. Crouch," interposed the young man. "Early paleolithic, aren't they?"

"Earlier!" said Chris. And they all laughed again.

"Well, now we have met," said the brother, "we'd better get our labels fixed. We got your names from Dr. Crouch, but we'd better give you ours. I'm called Horatio, but our father's choice of names is simply impossible, so we've all got aliases. I'm called Bill, and my sister is called Babe."

"Babe?" murmured Chris reflectively, and glanced at her. "Yes," he added, "I think Babe is quite appropriate."

The girl's dark eyes lit up and for a moment she scrutinized him intently. And in that moment, battle was joined.

"I'm older than you," she retorted.

Bill interposed hurriedly.

"We called her Babe because we thought she'd be the last. But she wasn't. There've been two more since then."

Tiny laughed, excitedly.

"Of course, you know, we're twins, and I'm not called Christine, really—everyone calls me 'Tiny'."

Bill smiled.

"Everyone?"

Tiny coloured.

"Well, everyone who knows me well," she said, and added hurriedly, "I say, would you two like a cup of tea? We've been camping in the punt and we—er—came back for the towels. It's only just down there," she pointed to the valley, "we're going to have one—do have one with us."

The Goolans glanced at one another. Babe explained:

"As a matter of fact, Dr. Crouch told us you were camping, and we came down to try to find you before you vanished again. We rather hoped you'd come to breakfast with us all."

She spoke to Chris, but Tiny answered:

"Breakfast! Oh, I'd love to!"

She gave her answer to Bill and edged nearer to him. It was a little sinuous movement that was plainly an invitation to him to talk to her and to leave his sister to Chris.

Chris was quite satisfied with the arrangement. Leaning back against the tomb, he smiled. Babe looked thoughtful.

"You haven't said you want to come to breakfast," she said.

"Is it necessary?"

"Oh, no. Merely polite."

She raised her eyebrows as she spoke. Chris noticed that they were very pretty eyebrows, narrow and arched, and at that moment, decidedly and becomingly impudent.

"Please make allowances. I'm only a country bumpkin."

Blue eyes met black, challenging, and she laughed.

"Dr. Crouch described you perfectly!"

Chris looked anxious.

"Dr. Crouch—he's not—entirely reliable—er—when he's talking about me."

"Wind up?"

"Badly!—what did he say about me?"

"He said you'd got the cheek of the devil, masked by the meekness of a saint."

"I've needed both—did he say anything else?"

"Quite a lot."

"Tell me!"

"Not likely!—I should say you've quite a good enough opinion of yourself already."

"I'm the only person that has."

She smiled, and began to pull at a little morsel of moss on the tomb.

"You seem older than your sister," she said, thoughtfully.

"I am. I was born two minutes earlier."

She continued tugging at the little strip of moss.

"Do you really want to come to breakfast with us?" she said, suddenly, looking up at him.

"Of course I do."

"Well, then, why don't you show it?"

There was a faint peevishness in the voice.

Chris laughed.

"I've been trained never to show what I wanted, in case I didn't get it."

Before she could answer, Tiny interrupted:

"Give me a fag, Chris. I simply must smoke."

Chris raised his bare arms.

"Search me!" he said, glancing down at his damp bathing costume.

"Oh, aren't I absurd?"

.. Bill came to the rescue. He held out a packet of Gold Flake. There were two cigarettes left.

"One each. I've tons more at the Stag."

Tiny took one and passed the packet to Chris. Bill struck a match. Tiny could hardly wait to light her cigarette before she burst into new ecstasy:

"Chris—they don't live at home—I mean—only sometimes at week-ends.—They live in London. Don't you?"

She turned the blue eyes to include the sister.

"In a flat or something?" asked Chris.

"Bill's is a flat," said Babe, "mine's the 'something.' A bath and a bed over a Mews."

"You see," explained Bill, "I'm legal: Babe's 'arty'—we agree, but our friends wouldn't."

"And Chris," added Tiny, "they're coming to see us when we're settled."

Chris looked at Babe.

"Are they?"

"If they're wanted."

Bill burst out laughing.

"Have you two started sparring, already?"

"I haven't," exclaimed Babe.

"Have I?" asked Chris.

"Yes—you thought the name 'Babe' suited me."

"Well, doesn't it?"

"You don't want to take any notice of him," explained Tiny, confidentially. "He fancies his weight a bit, but he's quite a good sort, really."

Chris opened his eyes and mouth.

"You wretched little time-server, Tiny——"

The Goolans burst out laughing.

"The twins are coming untwined!" said Babe. And then they all laughed.

"I must get some clothes on," said Chris.

Unheeding, he tossed away the empty cigarette carton. Laughing and talking, they all walked away. The carton sailed erratically through the air and settled upon a wreath

of shrivelled lilies that lay upon the vicar's grave. It came to rest just touching the edge of a visiting card, tied to the wreath. The full inscription now read :

“ Wills' Gold Flake.
In deep sorrow, from
Elizabeth Ganet.”

CHAPTER SIX

THE Goolans became lyrical over the river and the punt. But the lyric was interrupted by an argument between Chris and Tiny as to who should dress first.

"It won't take me five minutes," said Tiny, "and you take about an hour to shave."

Babe's black eyes sparkled.

"Have you started to shave, Mr. Barrymore?"

Chris turned his head slowly.

"I've been shaving for years," he said distantly.

Tiny giggled delightedly.

"You've got him on the raw there—his one ambition is to be hairy."

"Oh, no! Don't try to be hairy, Mr. Barrymore; you look much more fascinating as a cherub."

"A hairy man is an acquired taste," said Chris. "You're not old enough to have acquired it." Raising the flap, he vanished.

A moment or two passed, and there came the subdued roar of a primus stove. Then Chris's head reappeared.

"I've decided not to shave, after all," he said, and clambered out.

"Mind you don't stumble over your beard," said Tiny, and clambered in. The canvas bulged a little, and a voice whispered: "Er—it's all right, isn't it?—no silhouettes or anything?"

"The light's wrong for silhouettes," murmured Bill.

There was a pause, and Tiny's voice came again, agitatedly:

"I—I've got no mourning clothes—here—I simply can't come to breakfast."

There was an awkward pause. Bill nudged his sister and she clambered into the punt. The brothers stared at the river. Finally, Bill stood up.

"Just a minute, Barrymore."

Chris followed him till they were out of earshot.

"Dr. Crouch explained things," said Bill, staring up at the leaves.

"Did he?—Good. As long as—your people will understand."

"Oh, we're all right—all of us."

"Good."

There was a pause.

"Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks!"

"Damn!—I haven't got any."

They both laughed, and the shadow of the dead man vanished. A soft "Coo—ee!" came through the trees.

"That's Babe," said Bill. "She'll have explained things to your sister."

Five minutes later, Tiny raised the flap and the two brothers joined the two sisters. The tea was exquisite, and they found Christopher's cigarettes and some biscuits. A light wind ruffled the water and the trees began to whisper; and the sun coloured the river and sharpened the line of the shadows—dancing shadows, that threw flickering bands of light upon the young faces, sipping languorously from the big enamel mugs.

St. Cyprian's struck the half-hour.

"Breakfast's at eight," said Bill.

Tiny set down her mug and sighed rapturously.

"It's awfully kind of your people to ask us to breakfast!"
Bill coughed.

"They haven't!"

Tiny's eyes nearly started out of her head.

"Bill, you're a brute!" said Babe indignantly, and turning to Tiny she explained:

"It sounds awful, the way he puts it, but as a matter of fact—we never bother our parents with things like invitations. You needn't be a bit scared. They both want to meet you, badly."

"In any case," added Bill, "unless we introduce you, they wouldn't notice you. They've lost count of their offspring. If they saw two more at the table, they'd think it was just two more they'd begotten and forgotten."

Chris protested:

"I say—after all, six isn't a huge family."

"Not by old standards," said Babe, "but it's pretty phenomenal these days. And actually there were eight—one died as a baby, and Kim was killed in the War."

She paused, and added:

"I suppose I'd better give the inventory, hadn't I, Bill?"

He nodded. She lit a cigarette and drew up her knees. Chris sighed and looked reluctantly at the river.

"Our family's in layers, really, and the layers are all in pairs. Counting Mother and Father as one pair, the layers are sort of strata—different ages, each with its own fauna. Mother and Father are perfectly in period—the eighteenth-nineties. They still talk about croquet when they're by themselves—we've broken them of croquet at meal times. Then there's Elaine and Clym—they're Edwardians; Bill and me—we're neo-Georgian; and then there's David and Prue, two horrible little mechanical brats who dream of dirt-tracks and aeroplanes."

Bill nodded moodily, "And the new generation—David and Prue—they're ghastly."

"Tell us some more," said Tiny.

"Well," continued Babe, "Clym's the oldest and Elaine comes next—they're the War generation. They're all right, but a bit nostalgic. They've got reason to be, of course. Poor old Elaine lost her young man at Loos, and Clym lost his arm there, too."

"Eh?" exclaimed Chris, "has he lost an arm?"

"Yes—why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," said Chris, mendaciously. He was thinking of the one-armed stranger in the bar at the Anchor.

"Of course, he's always losing his arm," interposed Bill, "the artificial one, I mean. He's always leaving it somewhere—usually in a pub. But he always ties a visiting card to it, so it always comes back."

"By the way," said Babe, "he's lost it again. He went out last night with it, and I know he's lost it because it wasn't in the hatstand this morning."

"What's Clym, by profession," enquired Chris.

"Oh, he's a sub-editor of *The Moderate*," answered Babe, "a pretty ghastly review, frightfully dull and inspired."

Tiny turned to Chris excitedly:

"Chris—fancy!—sub-editor of *The Moderate*!"

Babe looked at Chris with raised eyebrows:

"You don't read it, do you?"

Chris swallowed hastily. He was swallowing his opinions. He had bought *The Moderate* regularly and read it voraciously. He had always rather admired his taste for *The Moderate*. It had seemed so obviously the paper for the intelligentsia.

"I look at it," he said, casually.

Tiny stared at him in horror. Babe smiled maliciously.

"Oh, so do I," she said, "it's so frightfully funny, isn't

it?—its heavy assumption of common sense in its political articles—as though there were any common sense in politics at all!—and its novel reviews in the form of an essay, by some disappointed young man just down from Oxford—with the novels dragged in at the end to illustrate his meaning and his cleverness!”

“Shut up, Babe!” said Bill. “Perhaps Barrymore has literary leanings.”

“Have you?” The black eyes were artlessly raised to his.

“He’s always wanted to write,” interrupted Tiny, “but Father put him into the auctioneer’s office here.”

The malice died out of the dark eyes.

“We must let you dress,” she said.

They all climbed ashore, except Chris. Moodily, he began to slip off his bathing costume. The others had gone, he imagined. The voices had died away. He felt really sore. Against the impregnable sterility of his father’s mind he had never sought to strive. The Bible and books on horticulture had been the vicar’s only mental food, and as one was inspired and the others irrelevant, Chris had turned elsewhere. Surreptitiously he had read, and *The Moderate* had helped him. And now *The Moderate* had been taken away from him. A really modern girl had laughed at *The Moderate*, and, which was worse, by implication she had laughed at its readers. He rubbed his head thoughtfully. It was no longer highbrow. At that moment, he almost disliked Babe.

And then Babe spoke. The voice came muffled by the canvas, low-pitched and faintly placatory:

“Mr. Barrymore!”

Chris dived for his shirt. “You can’t come in—er—I’m . . . well anyway you can’t come in.”

He tugged the shirt over his head and shoulders. A faint laugh sounded.

"I don't want to come in, I only want to say something to you."

Chris paused in the act of pulling on his trousers. "What do you want to say?"

A smile hovered at the corner of his lips, and he half turned his head, listening intently. There was a pause.

"I only want to—well—to say I'm sorry."

Chris smiled broadly.

"Whatever for?" he asked cheerfully. There was another pause, and the hidden voice spoke again, but it had lost the note of conciliation.

"I thought perhaps I might have hurt your feelings in saying what I did about *The Moderate*."

Chris laughed and fastened his belt.

"*The Moderate*?" he echoed, "why, what did you say?"

"If you've forgotten, there's no need for me to apologize."

"None whatever!" said Chris brightly, and raised the flap.

She was sitting on the grass, her legs crossed, her hands in her lap. She looked at him, frowned, hesitated, and stood up.

"Where are the others?" said Chris as he stepped ashore.

"On ahead."

She answered casually, her face averted, her eyes straying along the winding path among the trees. A shaft of sunshine came through the leaves, bathing her head and shoulders in brilliant light. About her were half-tones of green and grey, exquisitely blended, to throw into high relief her almost exotic colouring. The throat and cheeks were brown and glowing with life. The black hair shone glossy against the smooth forehead. In the lobe of the small ear, a little pearl-shaped green ear-ring caught a minute point of light.

Beneath the edge of the tight-fitting hat the smooth, dusky neck met the short-cut hair.

"Babe!"

She turned her head quickly, her eyes uncertain. "Yes?"

Chris smiled. She had countenanced the use of her nickname.

"You're pretty modern, aren't you?" he said, "I mean, really modern, in literature and art and things like that."

She hesitated.

"Well, yes—I suppose so. Why?"

He laughed, and without another word, caught her in his arms and kissed her. There was no time to struggle, for almost before she was a prisoner she was free again. She held herself tense, the dark eyes frowning heavily.

"You evidently don't know the rules."

Chris only laughed.

"Rules!—rules are Victorian. You laughed at me for trying to be modern in what I read, and you say you're modern yourself—and you're afraid to live up to your modern ideas—you're afraid to kiss."

"I'm not!" she said angrily.

"You are!"

"I'm not!"

"Then prove it—by kissing me."

For an instant she hesitated, staring at him. Then slowly she smiled and, just bending her slim body, she put her hands behind her and lightly touched his lips with hers. They drew back and both smiled, a little sheepishly.

"Come along," she said hurriedly, "or the others will think we're lost."

Neither spoke as they walked the narrow path together, but as they left the woods and passed into the sunshine of the green slope below the church she paused and glanced at him.

" You understand, of course, that . . . that kiss was only fun? "

Chris nodded gravely. She braced her shoulders.

" That's all right then," she said, in a businesslike voice, and set off walking again.

" Babe ! "

" Yes? " she answered, without looking at him.

" It was only fun—but it *was* fun, wasn't it? "

Slowly her head turned. The dark eyes peeped at him obliquely, and the pretty lips twitched at the corners.

" Do you realize you've known me for just one hour? " she said.

" And do you realize that I've known no one for nineteen years? "

The black eyes melted.

" You poor thing ! "

When they reached the Stag, they were told that the family had just sat down to breakfast. Whereupon Tiny lost her nerve.

" I—I simply daren't go in like this—no stockings on—and this awful sweater ! "

Bill was kind, but firm.

" Look at your brother's flannels—all over tea-stains ! "

" But—— " began Tiny, and then Babe and Bill took her arms and led her upstairs to the big dining-room on the first floor. Chris followed furtively. On the landing, Tiny nearly bolted again. The door was ajar and from within came a babel of voices.

" Chris," whispered Tiny, despairingly, but Chris had abandoned her.

Babe flung open the door. The twins had a momentary impression of a big table in a big room; of a very white cloth, bright silver, and lots of cups and saucers; of a huge pewter coffee-pot that gave off a lazy, fragrant steam;

and of a number of faces that all turned suddenly, as Babe called out:

"We've brought the Barrymores to breakfast!"

The whole family rose, with a creaking of chairs and a clatter of knives and forks that completely bewildered the twins. A rather small man, dressed in a grey flannel suit and wearing a clerical collar, turned his back on the table and looked at the four young people standing in the doorway. It was a critical moment for the twins. It was the first clerical collar they had seen for many days.

"We found them camping, Father," continued Babe, "and they'd got some appalling-looking sausages—so we brought them here."

There was an instant's silence, as the clergyman looked at the two stained white figures in the doorway. Tiny was scarlet.

"We—we—said we ought not to come . . . like this . . . Mr. Goolan."

Mr. Goolan smiled—a quaint, whimsical smile, that drew down the corners of the rather thin mouth and brought little spidery lines to the corners of the dark eyes.

"It's no good saying 'ought not' to my children, Christine, and it's no good visiting them in nice clothes—they wouldn't appreciate them."

Tiny hesitated, sighed, and smiled.

"I wasn't thinking of them," she said, "but of you."

Mr. Goolan shook his head, gravely.

"You'll have to break yourself of that habit—it's old-fashioned."

"No nostalgia, Father," said Babe, "we're much too hungry. Let's get all the introductions over, and then—hams and eggs—much ham and many eggs. Mother, come along!"

Mrs. Goolan was a rotund little body, with very white

hair and very blue eyes. They were rather anxious eyes, and reflected her nature, which was to worry over all the things that never happened and meet courageously the things that did. She gave Tiny one yearning look, and kissed her.

"I am so glad you've come to see us, dear; Dr. Crouch seemed very doubtful whether you would."

She took Tiny's arm in a proprietary way, and the blue eyes wandered worriedly about the table.

"Prue dear, ring the bell and tell them to lay two more places." Prue looked at Tiny wonderingly.

"I like your hair!"

"And I like yours," said Tiny.

"I don't—my hair's hideous!"

But it wasn't hideous; it was only rather untidy, and worn in a heavy black fringe over the small, elfish face.

Tiny laughed, and Mrs. Goolan "shushed" her youngest away. Whereupon David appeared, a short and stocky boy, in a grey flannel suit with short knickers that left bare a pair of knobby, bruised knees.

"Do you drive a car?" he asked.

Tiny shook her head.

"Does your brother?"

"No."

"Oh," said David, and walked away.

Mrs. Goolan sighed.

"Please forgive them, dear. It's the example the others set them. Elaine!—where is Elaine?"

Meanwhile, Chris had shaken hands with Mr. Goolan. Bill and Babe had left him. He swallowed uneasily.

"It's very good of you to take it like this, Sir," he added jerkily. "It—seemed all right in these clothes—outside, but I really think that we do owe you an apology."

"See how you feel after breakfast, Chris—an empty

stomach often makes one feel rather humble. Now let me introduce you to my eldest son—Clym.”

Chris saw a big, untidy-looking man strolling down the room towards them. There was no mistaking that crumpled soft collar and old tweed coat, with the sleeve hanging empty from the shoulder.

“Clym—this is Chris Barrymore.”

Clym nodded perfunctorily.

“Morning!” he said in a deep voice. Then he stared hard at Chris. Chris smiled, tentatively. It was successful. There was a slight twitch of the thin lips and the black eyebrows contracted, and beneath, a dark eye winked. Mr. Goolan vanished, to find his wife.

“Where’s the sister?” said Clym.

“Over there—but she doesn’t know you saw her.”

Clym nodded.

“Nor do my lot.”

“Thanks awfully!”

“Reliable people at the Anchor?”

“Very—why?”

“Left my arm there last night—it came off with a tankard in the hand, so I discarded it permanently.”

Chris burst out laughing. Clym raised his eyebrows. There was no vestige of a smile on the thin face.

“What’s Clym saying?” said a pretty voice.

Chris glanced up quickly. He guessed the new-comer to be Elaine. He thought her rather lovely; tall, fair-haired and graceful; very gentle in voice, but a little aloof in manner. She had fine eyes, large and grey, but they seemed to Chris to be rather tired.

Clym turned to Elaine:

“This arm business—Barrymore says the Anchor people are sound, so it’ll come back.”

At that moment the door opened and the parlour

maid entered with a bulky parcel. Everyone stopped talking.

“ A parcel for Mr. C. Goolan,” she said.

There was a burst of cheering from Prue and David, followed by Prue’s shrill voice :

“ It’s your arm, Clym ; so you’ll be able to cut your own ham ! ”

Clym accepted the parcel gravely. Elaine gave a reluctant laugh.

“ Breakfast, children ! ” said Mrs. Goolan, hurriedly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM the moment breakfast started, the Goolans began to spoil Tiny. Bill and Clym were the worst offenders, for she sat between them, trying to talk to both at once and to eat at the same time. Prue had fallen in love with her. She hardly ate at all, but sat with her elbows on the table and her little, pointed chin in her hands, staring with her big dark eyes at Tiny's flushed cheeks and laughing lips. Even David unbent a little when he heard that Tiny had been in an aeroplane.

Chris sat between Elaine and Babe, and forgetful of his manners, spoke to neither. Clym was his focus-point. He had had nineteen years of association almost entirely feminine. So he listened to Clym—a sub-editor, a man, and a man of the world. It was the world he wanted, just then. The flesh and the devil could wait till he was older.

And while he listened to Clym, Babe grew more and more morose. Everything was turning out wrong. She had found them, and the family had pinched them, like they did everything else. Not that the theft of Tiny worried her. Tiny was all right, but she was very young and rather emotional. It was Christopher's attitude that annoyed her. Half-an-hour ago he had kissed her, and now he didn't even speak to her. She dug her spoon into her egg viciously, and a trickle of rich yellow slid down the curve of the shell.

Elaine watched Tiny. A shadowy smile hovered about the sensitive lips, as she saw Clym, the ungainly, the untidy, worshipping at the shrine of maidenhood.

Tiny was talking volubly, and nodding and shaking her head when her mouth was too full to talk at all. And as her head nodded and shook, the close-cropped curls shook and nodded with it, and the big collar of the white sweater rubbed her chin and ears so that she would pause, artlessly, to rub both chin and ears with the back of a hand that held a piece of toast as small as the mouth it was doomed to enter.

"She really is rather lovely," murmured Elaine to Mrs. Goolan.

"Of course, you'll all have to be most frightfully careful in Okebourne," said Tiny, embracing the whole Goolan family with a sweep of her big blue eyes. "I mean—I really feel I ought to warn you all—the people here are simply terrible."

"Tabbies?" enquired Clym.

Tiny nodded emphatically.

"Job for you, Father," said Clym, "more tabby-taming." He turned to Tiny again.

"Our father has a way with tabbies. His last cure of souls was at All Hallows', Gunderley Green—'The Queen of the Suburbs'—and the suburbs breed a special brand of spinster, educated at Mudie's and graduates of the Primrose League. They envisage God as a first-class season-ticket holder, and Heaven as a double-fronted house with a crazy-pavement path to the front door."

Mr. Goolan smiled.

"It is human to try to interpret these things in the terms of our ordinary experience. Your heaven, Clym, probably has 'Saloon Bar' inscribed on the door."

There was a derisive cheer from the rest of the family. Clym bowed:

"Your rubber, Father."

Then Tiny revealed Chris's literary aspirations.

"Chris wants to write."

Clym raised his eyebrows.

"A gas oven's more certain."

"Then try *The Moderate*," said Babe, "guaranteed to asphyxiate in two issues."

"I think it's the best literary weekly in England," said Chris defiantly. Clym rose and bowed. As he sat down again, he said: "But why write at all?"

Chris seized the opportunity. He had thought a lot about writing and life, being at the age when the two seem, in some way, to be complementary. Eagerly he dug up a sentence he had written in his commonplace book:

"There's nothing left to do in life, but to write about it," he said.

He spoke casually, to make it sound more epigrammatic and less as though he knew it by heart—which he did.

Babe smiled sweetly.

"That's come out of *The Moderate*, I should think."

Clym shook his head.

"It hasn't, but it's quite true enough to go into it," he paused, and added, "What have you written, Barrymore?"

Chris flushed. "Oh! only an article or two—and a short story."

"They're pretty good, anyway, Mr. Clym," said Tiny and added confusedly, "I mean, Mr. Goolan."

Chris seized the opportunity.

"I—er—would you come and see us when we're settled in?"

Babe pushed away her egg in disgust. He had never asked her to come—not directly—only through his sister, and yet he had the impudence to kiss her.

"Certainly!" said Clym.

The meal was over all too soon for Tiny. As they left the room and trooped downstairs, she suddenly remembered that at 2.30 she and Chris would be leaving Okebourne for

ever. Desperately she sought for some excuse to keep the Goolans with them till the very last moment. A flash of inspiration came to her—they must be shown over the vicarage. She gave the invitation as they all stood in the lounge, and it was instantly accepted.

"And we needn't go through the village," she added. "There's a path through the churchyard to the gate in our wall—er—your wall, I mean."

As they all trooped out of the hotel, Tiny found herself next to Clym.

"You will come and see Chris, won't you?"

"I can't guarantee to choose a day when you're out."

She laughed.

"I'll be there too, of course, but it's Chris who wants to see you so badly."

Clym bowed.

"Most delicately put, Tiny!"

"Oh, no! I—I didn't mean it that way—I only meant that . . . that he wants a little encouragement badly."

Clym stroked his chin.

"I can give him encouragement, but he must supply the ability."

"He will!" said Tiny.

Then Bill claimed her, and she was borne away, leaving Clym stroking his chin. He stared after her as she walked across the sunlit road—a dainty little figure in white, against the sombre green of an aged yew standing just within the churchyard. Elaine joined him, and followed the direction of his eyes.

"She's Bill's, Clym—I can see it standing out a mile."

He nodded.

"I am almost inclined to dislike Bill."

She laughed quietly.

"It would be only a waste of time. Come along."

It was at this moment that Chris perpetrated his second offence. As the party left the Inn, they sorted themselves out. Bill and Tiny were already ahead; the vicar and his wife were escorted by the two youngest; Chris attached himself to Clym, and Babe was left to solitude or Elaine. She chose Elaine. Most people chose Elaine when they were in solitude. Unfortunately for Elaine, they forgot her when they were not.

Ahead, Clym and Chris were talking—Chris eagerly, Clym monosyllabically. Babe was mute—so mute that Elaine noticed it.

"Don't you like them, Babe?" she said, as they gained the churchyard.

"Tiny's all right—the boy's a puppy."

Elaine turned her head to hide a smile. A light wind was playing in the branches of the hanger, and all the world seemed full of sunlight and soft sound.

"Poor kid! He's just bursting for male society," she said.

"He can burst, as far as I'm concerned."

At the door in the garden wall they all met again, for Tiny insisted on waiting for all, before allowing one to enter. Swinging open the door, she stood aside, her arm outstretched to hold it open, and counted them, laughing, as they passed through. It reminded Elaine of Oranges and Lemons and the Bells of St. Clement's.

"Now you!" said Tiny to her.

Elaine smiled and passed through. She heard the door latch and before the party could reform she moved unobtrusively to Christopher's side.

"Can you keep a secret, Chris?"

He looked up quickly.

"Why—er—yes, of course."

She smiled.

"Well then—don't say I said so, but—Babe wants you."

She passed on and joined Clym. The garden looked at its best. They were beneath the whispering shade of the elms, and beyond was sunlight and blossom, and the long green carpet of the lawn.

"Oh! isn't it beautiful?" murmured Elaine.

Clym nodded. "You'll be all right here."

"While it lasts."

"He's only sixty-five."

"And I'm thirty-five—if I live to their age, I've a good few years to live alone."

"Rot!—I'm a born bachelor."

She laughed softly. "Good—that's a promise."

Meanwhile, the others had come up to them, all except Babe and Chris. Elaine glanced over her shoulder and smiled. They were standing by the closed door, talking earnestly. Actually, they were quarrelling.

"I suppose all you've come for is another kiss," said Babe.

"Don't you think the others might see?"

The colour in her cheeks deepened.

"That's not a bit funny."

"It ought to be—you said the kiss was!"

"It wasn't—it . . . it was just a piece of perfect bad manners."

She was really angry now, and the black eyes showed it as much as the set lips.

Chris became serious.

"Look here, Babe—what have I done to make you so angry?"

"Done!—you've only made me look extremely cheap—kissing me without any encouragement and . . . and then . . . taking not the slightest notice of me. I don't want you

to take notice—don't think that . . . it's only that you . . . you seem to think that I can be kissed and dropped like some of these village girls you've practised on."

She tried to walk away, but he caught hold of her arm.

"Babe, please listen."

"I won't."

But as she stood still and didn't stop up her ears, her words lacked conviction.

"Babe, I kissed you because . . . well, because you're . . . beautiful and . . . honestly . . . because I've never kissed a girl before—not a real girl—only kids at parties."

She turned her head slowly.

"But you prefer men to women. You prefer Clym to me."

He hesitated, then suddenly he threw back his head. "Oh, don't you understand?—I want everything!—men friends and kisses, and books, and bowls of wine, and love and life—every damn thing in the universe, I want!"

She heaved a rapturous sigh: "Oh, I see."

Chris took a quick glance down the garden:

"And they can't!" he whispered, and before she could move he had kissed her again.

When they reached the others, the others had reached the house. They were all standing in the dining-room.

"What a perfectly charming room!" said Bill, "we'll have the table at right angles to the fireplace—then we can all see out."

"All except me," said Mr. Goolan.

"Ah! but you always see *in*," said Clym.

The twins exchanged glances. This was the room where silence had reigned for nearly fifteen years. Tiny led them next to her Father's study.

"Father—you may have this," said Babe.

"Don't you think it's rather big for me?"

"Oh, we'll use it too, of course, but you can call it yours, and put your books and things in it."

"Thank you!" said Mr. Goolan. "Come along, my dear," he added to his wife, "I should like to see what accommodation they have allotted you."

He passed out, followed by the two youngest and Elaine.

Clym looked round the room doubtfully.

"Think it's big enough for him?—seems to me you couldn't swing a cat in it."

"You could," said Chris, "where you can swing a cane, you can swing a cat."

Babe opened her eyes.

"You don't mean to say you've been caned?"

Chris nodded.

"Oh! but how too marvellously archaic!"

"That was not the impression it made on me," said Chris.

She burst out laughing.

"I think I'm rather glad."

David popped his head in.

"Are there any cellars or attics?" he said, in a business-like voice.

"Both, Dave," answered Tiny.

"Good! let's get a move on and see 'em."

He vanished.

"The rising generation!" said Clym.

They passed out of the study, and then someone noticed that the bull-terrier was missing.

"Wherever has Pip got to?" exclaimed Babe, "he was in the churchyard—I saw him."

"He's probably looking for a postman—he didn't eat much breakfast," said Clym.

Bill looked alarmed.

"I say, we must find him—there are chickens and things about."

They hurried into the dining-room and all came to a halt. Trotting across the lawn was the bull-terrier. In his mouth was Clym's arm. There was an outburst of laughter from everyone, as the dog waddled on to the veranda.

"Animal sagacity!" said Clym, "he saw me come out of the Stag without it."

Pip wagged himself into a complete circle and dropped the arm at Clym's feet.

"For goodness' sake, throw it away," said Babe, "it's a most obscene-looking object."

"It has its advantages," murmured Clym; "you can leave it round a girl's waist, when you're not with her, to keep other men away."

He picked it up, dusted it with his handkerchief, and walked out of the room using it as a walking-stick, the fingers downwards.

The complete house inspection took nearly an hour, and at the end even David was satisfied. There was an attic-window that promised a chance to break his neck, and a gloomy cellar with a flight of stone steps, to provide an alternate mode of suicide.

"It really is a most delightful house," said Mr. Goolan, as they stood in the empty dining-room. The twins had opened the french windows. Outside, the lawn sloped down to the wall. Above and beyond was a broad brown hill, topped with a copse of beech. In the stillness they could hear the sleepy river singing in the little valley at the foot of the hanger.

Mr. Goolan turned to the twins.

"As soon as ever you wish, you must come and stay with us. We're only really five in family. Elaine and the two children are the only regular inhabitants. The others—well, they just come and go, so we have to keep beds aired. We can easily air two more."

Before Tiny could answer, Bill intervened :

" He means it, Tiny, and so do we all—don't we? "

" Those in favour——" said Clym, and held up his cork arm at full length, so that the fingers nearly touched the ceiling.

The door bell rang and Chris hurried away. He was gone some time, and when he returned he was smiling.

" It's the furniture van, Tiny, for our furniture, and—they're going to take us too, all the way. There's economy for you! "

" Oh, I say! " protested Bill, " you simply can't travel in a furniture van."

" Can't we? " said Tiny, " you don't know us! Chris, it was inspiration! "

Bill and Babe stayed with them to supervise the moving of the furniture. The rest of the family went back to the Stag to order lunch for ten at one.

Just as the meal was finished, Dr. Crouch called. Tiny was so excited that she could hardly tell him all there was to tell. But Chris and the Goolans helped her, and as Dr. Crouch was helped to a glass of port he accepted all the babel as inspired utterance.

" And we're going in the furniture van," added Tiny, " so you'd better warn the village in case it misses a scandal."

But there was no need to warn either Miss Ganet or the Misses Gribble. They were at their posts at the window of The Laurels, and with them was Jubby, biliously blasé. As St. Cyprian's struck two, a motor furniture van rumbled up the street and drew up outside the Stag Inn. And out of the Stag Inn trooped the Goolan family, complete from vicar to bull-terrier.

The van stopped with the open end visible to the occupants of The Laurels. The back-board was lowered on chains,

like a drawbridge, and within, seated in two wicker chairs, were the twins.

There was a babel of voices, much laughter, and a villainously hollow bark from the bull-terrier. Dr. Crouch was there, trying to make good advice audible above good wishes. The twins were standing side by side now; Tiny in black, Chris in dark grey with a small diamond of black let into one sleeve.

Then the van started and the twins nearly fell out. But they recovered their balance and held on to the chains, and waved frantically.

The whine of the engine rose in pitch and declined into a settled hum. The van grew smaller and smaller, the two faces shrank to little white points. Then a bend in the road hid all. St. Cyprian's struck the half-hour.

"Poor Mr. Barrymore!" murmured the three spinsters, behind the curtains.

"Poor babes!" murmured Mrs. Goolan, in the sunshine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE park was crowded. It was lunch time and a day of equatorial heat. Chris took off his hat and put it on top of the attaché case by the side of his chair. The hat almost hid the attaché case; Chris was glad that it did. He hated the attaché case and all it contained.

He had had his lunch and was feeling drowsy. His head began to nod.

“Ticket, please!”

He opened his eyes. It was the first time he had been caught napping. He usually spotted the chair attendant at a safe distance, and moved to a free seat. It was not that he grudged the money, nor even that he was more than normally dishonest. He had discussed the ethics of chair-bilking with Babe. It had arisen out of an incident that concerned them both. One evening at dusk they had been charged fourpence when they were only sitting on one chair. The attendant had said that they were lucky not to have to pay forty shillings. That had been in another park, but the prejudice against parks in general had remained.

Chris tendered twopence and received a ticket. Morosely he thrust his hand into his trousers pocket. Then he smiled. After all, he still had sixpence left and it was only a twopenny 'bus ride to Butler's Mews. But the thought of money set up a chain of other thoughts. Finally he picked up the attaché case and opened it.

On top lay a piece of cardboard on which was written in unsteady block letters:

"THE BLONDE STAR PUBLISHING CO.—COMPLETE EDITIONS of all GREAT WORKS."

Distastefully he opened the folded cardboard. On the inside was pasted a series of printed headings that he had cut out of a catalogue :

"Complete Edition of the Works of Bernard Shaw.

22 vols. : 6s. each (instalments : 5s. p. month).

—do— —do— John Galsworthy.

18 vols. : 6s. each (instalments : 5s. p. month)."

There were a lot more dittoes to cover the cerebral outpourings of H. G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, Kipling, and Conrad. He wrinkled his nose. All dead, or moribund, he mused. What was wanted was a complete edition of the works of Christopher Barrymore. Unfortunately, Christopher Barrymore had not yet started to write.

He closed the attaché case and yawned. Big Ben struck two. He really ought to try to sell a complete edition to somebody. It was now August, and he had been trying to sell complete editions to somebody for nearly three months. One *Forsyte Saga* and one *Golden Bough* was all he had sold, and then the fellow hadn't kept up his instalments. He made a small mental calculation. In three months he had earned thirty shillings. In the same period he had spent thirty pounds—he and Tiny between them. He really must make an effort, he mused, and fell asleep.

"Ticket, please !"

Chris started and sat up.

"I've got one," he said.

"May I see it, please ?"

Chris felt in all his pockets.

"Well, I know I had one."

The attendant smiled. Chris fancied there was a hint of derision in his eye.

"But I've only just bought it," he protested.

"Perhaps you dropped it, and one of the piggins 'as 'ad it." Chris frowned.

"I can always pay again," he said coldly.

The attendant nodded. "That's what I'm 'ere for."

Chris paid again.

After the attendant had gone he carried on a long silent conversation with him. He told him exactly what he, the attendant, was, and who he, Chris, was. He told him that he had a private income and that he could afford to buy a chair if he wanted it—buy it right out, without having to pay twopence to sit on it. In the end, the apocryphal attendant apologized and Chris forgave him. Meanwhile, he had only got fourpence left. He really must sell a complete edition. Not that it mattered much if he didn't. After all, the weather was magnificent and the skirts were getting shorter and shorter.

For ten lazy, sensuous moments, he watched all the pretty legs that passed and repassed. There were millions of girls' legs in the world, he mused, most of them worth examination. With luck, he might be able to secure one pair, permanently. Two out of all these delicious silky varieties, thin and plump, short and long. He sighed. But the weather was lovely and the skirts were getting shorter. Even since he'd been in London, he estimated the shrinkage at an inch. He began to work it out mathematically. Granted the same rate of attrition, by the time he was twenty-one he ought to be able to——

"Ticket, please!"

Chris thrust out the ticket, viciously.

The attendant stared, stammered, and passed on. Chris wiped his forehead. On the grass beneath the trees he could see a dropsical pigeon regurgitating methodically. It was probably his ticket, he thought.

A pair of dark eyes smiled at him from beneath a pretty little hat. He smiled back. But it was too hot to follow the hat, and besides, it was a few men friends he wanted. He yawned at the pretty face that looked back, after which it never looked back again.

He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter-past three. He really must try to sell a complete edition. Pall Mall was only just up the steps, and the bank was only just in Pall Mall. He had been given the name of the bank by the man who had failed to keep up his instalments on the *Forsyte Saga*.

"There's a fellow there who reads—mention my name and he'll see you. His name's Throsslewait—you can't forget it."

He would go and see Mr. Throttlewait now, he decided.

Barland's Bank in Pall Mall was a colossal edifice in stone. It was the latest example of Commercial Corinthian—that is to say, it was plastered with florid pillars, none of which supported anything except themselves. The building as a whole was supported by the public.

Chris knew little of banks. The one in Chelsea, he rather liked. The manager had seemed a decent sort of man, particularly when the account was opened with one hundred and twelve pounds. Chris wasn't sure that he hadn't changed a little now that the balance was down to eighty-five pounds. He hoped not, but he rather thought so. He entered Barland's Bank at 3.29, which showed that he knew little about banks, for by the time he had reached Mr. Throsslewait's department the bank was closed and the clerks were smoking. He felt a little uneasy as he approached the long counter and found that he had it entirely to himself. And then a few heads turned and eyes looked at him, in expression respectfully bitter.

He coughed jauntily and put his attaché case on the

counter. When he looked up again all the respectfully bitter faces had vanished.

At 3.35 he coughed again, whereupon a rather elegant and languid young man came to him:

"Are you being attended to?"

The tone of voice was a subtle mixture of politeness and distrust. Chris did not know it, but the elegant young man was thinking: "Is he a customer, or a clerk?"

Chris rehearsed the name he was to ask for—"Throttlewait—you can't forget it," his informant had said.

"Can I speak to Mr. Throttlewait?"

The elegant young man's eyebrows rose.

"Mr. Who?"

"Mr. Throttlewait."

The young man seemed to be amused. He was plainly reassured—Chris was not a customer.

"Hang on, will you?" he said, casually, and walked over to two or three other young men. There was some conversation, and a number of grinning faces looked at Chris. Finally the elegant young man vanished behind a mahogany partition.

Chris waited. He had suddenly become rather thirsty. And then Mr. Throttlewait appeared. He was an elderly, worried-looking man, with glasses. He had plainly been interrupted, for he had a number of papers and a pen in his hands. He was also plainly in a very great hurry. He looked as though he were usually in a hurry, but more so now than usually.

Coming to the counter, he pushed his glasses up on to his forehead.

"Yes?" he said, suspiciously.

Chris smiled uneasily. Something told him that this man would not be really interested in a complete edition of either Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, or Rudyard Kipling. But

he had got to interest him. When he had had his first interview with the manager of The Blonde Star Publishing Company, it had been emphasized that he had got to interest people in complete editions.

"There's money in it, Mr. Barrymore," the manager had said, "and some of our men make big money. It can be done, and there's no reason why you should not do it. But you've got to interest the people in these complete editions."

Chris moistened his lips and smiled.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Throttlewait."

The worried-looking man raised his eyes to heaven, lowered them, and thumped the counter:

"My name's *not* Throttlewait—it's *Throsslewait*—T-H-R-O-S-S-L-E-wait. I'm sick and tired of telling people that my name is not Throttlewait!"

Somewhere near at hand somebody tittered. Chris looked haggard.

"Er—I see—er——"

He stopped.

Mr. Throsslewait stared.

"Anyway, what do you want?"

Chris grabbed frantically at the attaché case. He talked while he fumbled with the latch.

"Your name—was given me by Mr. Redditch, of your St. James's Street Branch——"

"Was it?—well it's a pity he didn't give it right! He knows well enough that my name's Throsslewait—not Throttlewait."

Chris dived into the interior of his attaché case and drew out a specimen copy of *Man and Superman*.

"I understand you read, Mr. Throsslewait—er—can I interest you in this complete edition of the Works of Bernard Shaw?—handsomely bound in——"

" Bernard Shaw !—the man who, more than any other, has helped these Socialists to get into office—I'd burn his books, if I had them."

Chris sighed.

" Well, why not buy them—then you can burn them."

Mr. Throsslewait looked very hard at him. Chris smiled tentatively. It worked. Mr. Throsslewait suddenly smiled too.

" What else have you got? "

" A complete edition of Galsworthy, handsomely bound in—— "

" Yes, I know all about the binding—have you got the *Forsyte Saga* separately."

Chris sighed.

" We can make it up separately."

" Very well, I'll—— "

" Mr. Throsslewait ! " A commanding voice called from the back of the office. Mr. Throsslewait hurried away.

Chris waited. A *Forsyte Saga*—that wasn't too bad. He'd sell a complete edition yet. He waited a few more minutes. Mr. Throsslewait did not return. Finally, at four o'clock, Chris coughed again. The elegant young man returned.

" Are you waiting for Throsslewait? "

" Well—yes, I was."

" Well, I shouldn't, sonny—he's gone home."

" Home? " echoed Chris blankly. " Why—he was in the middle of—of a conversation with me ! "

The elegant young man nodded.

" Yes—he's like that. Getting old, you know. Were you trying to sell him books? "

Chris nodded. The elegant young man yawned.

" Bit of a mug's game, isn't it? "

Chris nodded.

"But it suits me all right," he added, "because I'm a mug. Good afternoon."

He took the first 'bus to Chelsea. He must see Babe for a moment or two before he went back to Tiny.

At Sloane Square he got off. He was feeling in better spirits—why, he did not know. Then suddenly he found that he had left his attaché case on the 'bus.

"Well, of course, that explains it," he said, and lit a cigarette. Turning down a side street, he passed between two tall houses and entered Butler's Mews. He liked Butler's Mews—liked it quite apart from the fact that Babe's quaint little flat was there, above a private garage.

The horses and carriages, the footmen, coachmen, and grooms—these had all gone, but the cobbles were still there, and the little print curtains in the windows above the folding doors, and the flower-boxes, neat in their green paint, with scarlet geraniums glowing against the dingy walls as the sun slanted into the narrow court.

It was snug, out-of-the-way, and the people were good-natured and made a fuss of Babe, as good-natured people should. They were chauffeurs and their wives, and Chris was beginning to know them, as they were beginning to know him.

They recognized him now, two or three of the men. They were hosing down the powerful, shining, elegant monsters that had replaced the glossy-coated horses. They had established a freemasonry of signs with Chris. They knew whom he came to see. If she were out, they would shake their heads gravely; if she were in, they would nod and smile meaningly.

They nodded and smiled now, and Chris nodded and smiled back. He tugged at the long chain that tugged in turn at the old-fashioned bell. A series of sepulchral peals sounded within the bowels of the dingy building. And then

a window popped open and a head popped out—a head completely cut off from the body by a pair of cretonne curtains that were gathered tightly round the neck. The sun polished the wavy black hair and brought out the colour of the lips, so that even the geraniums looked dull—at least, they did to Chris.

She smiled down at him.

“Darling—I’m in my bath—can you wait?”

“Of course, darling—can I wait in the bathroom?”

“Don’t be coarse, darling—give me five minutes.”

He gave her five minutes, and was admitted and led up the steep narrow stairs, into the tiny room with its tiny bed.

“Oh, Babe—you smell divine!”

“Bath salts, darling . . . and . . . oh, Chris darling! . . . let me breathe.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She laughed a little breathlessly, holding the silk kimono tightly.

“Chris darling—do be more disciplined. I’m sure you’ll end by ravishing me.”

“It’s a contingency I had not overlooked,” said Chris. And then they both laughed and kissed again.

“And, Chris darling—I’ve bought the most marvellous pair of cami-knicks.”

“Good—may I see them?”

“Of course—I’ll go and get them.”

“Eh?”

“They’re in the drawer.”

“Oh!”

“Don’t be coarse, darling!”

She took a box of cigarettes from the mantelpiece and tossed them on to the bed.

“Help yourself, while I finish dressing.”

Chris sighed and helped himself. As the door closed he

lay back on the bed. When she came back, she was in a short flowered frock, and looked very fresh and fragrant. A green cigarette-holder projected from the corner of her mouth, and round the smooth bare arm was the gold armlet that had shocked the Misses Gribble.

She began to brush her hair before the mirror above the mantelpiece.

"You seem to have forgotten my new cami-knicks."

"I haven't, darling—I've only lost interest."

She fastened a slide in the black hair.

"What a pity—because I'm wearing them now."

Chris sat up.

"Eh? "

She glanced over her shoulder obliquely, smiling.

"May I see them, Babe darling? "

"Why do you want to? "

"Why do you wear them, if they're not to be seen? "

"Well—in case one had an accident."

"Have an accident, darling! "

She turned round and leant with her shoulders against the mantelpiece. Her cheeks were warm.

"I . . . I don't think I really ought, Chris darling."

"Of course not, darling, but please do."

She hesitated.

"Look in that long mirror then . . . and . . . swear you won't turn your head."

"I swear! "

He rivetted his eyes on the long narrow mirror that faced the fireplace.

He could see her, hot-cheeked and hesitant.

"After all, we shall be married one day, darling," he murmured encouragingly. And then he caught his breath. The mirror had become a dainty Kirchner study in colour, pale green and diaphanous black silk.

He turned his head quickly, but not quickly enough.

She was lighting a cigarette. The long black lashes hovered above the cheeks as she drew at the match.

Then she peeped up.

"I can't understand myself, Chris darling . . . I . . . I hate it when . . . when men stare at my legs, and yet . . . oh, Chris, your face looked so sweet in the glass."

He kissed her, and they drew apart, rather forlornly.

"Never mind, Chris darling—one day we'll be married."

"Er—yes, only—well, we want to enjoy ourselves first."

"Thank you!" she said, and turned back to the mirror.

Chris lay back on the bed again.

She finished brushing her hair.

"Are you going to take me out to tea?"

"Yes—do you know a place where one can get a really decent tea at one penny per head?"

She smiled.

"I've got five shillings."

"Yes, but—Babe——"

"You're a hundred per cent. middle-class. Come on."

They went to their favourite place, a small house facing the river, with a sign hanging outside bearing the device of a large green grasshopper. They had a table for two in a dark corner, and ate big home-made scones and drank tea out of huge thick cups, with big red and yellow flowers on them.

"You know, Babe," said Chris suddenly, "you did look lovely in the mirror."

"Did I, darling?"

He nodded.

"I'm frightfully sexed, aren't I," he added, musingly.

She smiled.

"So am I, but . . . oh, I wouldn't be anything else. Sex

is life, and beauty, and art, and imagination, and all the things that matter. Under-sexed people are undersized in everything—small minds, small instincts, and tiny, mean little hearts that can't beat madly—not like mine does, Chris darling, when you kiss me."

They looked at one another, and he caught her hand.

"Babe—I believe I love you!"

The dark eyes were thoughtful.

"Quite sure, Chris?"

"Why, of course—why do you say that?"

"You're always saying you want to meet men."

"Well, darling, you wouldn't like me to say I wanted to meet women, would you?"

She laughed, reluctantly.

"I wish I didn't love you," she sighed.

"Yes, darling, we all feel like that sometimes," said Chris, cheerfully. He stood up and felt in his pocket.

"It's under your plate."

"Er—thanks—er—many thanks."

She took his arm.

Outside, he broke the news:

"Babe—I'm out of a job."

"Were you ever in one, darling?"

He told her of the loss of the attaché case. She raised her eyes to heaven.

"Thank God!"

"Amen."

For an instant she stared thoughtfully at the river.

"Let's celebrate it—with Tiny and Bill."

"Babe, you're a genius!"

They just caught Bill on the telephone as he was leaving his office. He was frightfully enthusiastic, but he had no money. They told him to meet them nevertheless, complete with Tiny.

At six o'clock, they all met.

"Where shall we go?" said Bill. "I've five and six-pence."

"When in doubt—go to Clym," said Babe.

They went.

CHAPTER NINE

BIG BEN was just clanging out the hour of six when the four young people entered St. Stephen's Mansions.

"Is it all right?" said Tiny. "It's only a fortnight since he took us all out before."

"Of course it is," answered Babe. "We're 'copy,' really—he writes us all up into some heavy lament in *The Moderate*, about the post-War generation."

"And anyway," interposed Bill, "he owes us something. If Aunt Alice hadn't remembered him in her will, she mightn't have forgotten us."

The lift regurgitated them on the fourth floor. It was a dignified floor, paved with parquet.

"The man reeks of comfort," said Babe, pressing the bell of number 88.

Briggs opened the door. Briggs was the sort of man who would open Clym's door. He had a face that looked as though it had been made out of teak by a cubist carpenter. Clym always said that his head was of the same material. It had kept out a section of the driving band of a German 5.9 shell, with no result more visible than a slight depression between the temples. Here the tough black hair grew more sparsely, a semi-circle of spikes that faced one another across the shiny cavity. The blow had made Briggs blink, and he had never quite broken himself of the habit. But Clym overlooked it, except when he came home very late, and then he always accused Briggs of winking.

"A'ternoon, Miss." His voice betrayed the chronic asthma of a Company Sergeant-Major.

"Is Mr. Clym in?"

"Yes, Miss."

They entered.

Clym sat at a table in a big room, full of tobacco smoke and lined with bookcases. The table was littered with papers. He had taken off coat and waistcoat, and was wearing a pair of red braces.

As they entered, he looked up.

"Clym," said Babe, coaxingly, "Chris has lost his job with the Blonde Star, and we want to celebrate—only—we're broke."

"Yes?" said Clym, and went on writing.

She waited.

"Clym dear, don't be so editorial!"

She paused.

"Come on, Clym—put that tripe away and come out with some real modern people."

Tiny leant her hands on the edge of the table.

"Are we really disturbing you, Clym?" she said gently.

Clym looked up reproachfully.

"Tiny—they exploit you shamelessly."

"Exploit her!" interposed Chris. "She volunteered to do the cadging."

"Is that true?"

"Well, I—er—I did say I'd ask you—and I do want to go."

"Pass me my coat and my arm," said Clym.

"Must you take your arm?" enquired Babe uneasily.

"It's imperative. It's the only one I'm allowed to put round Tiny's waist."

Tiny laughed softly.

"If you like to take me out to dinner alone one evening, Clym, you can leave your arm at home."

"Come here, Delilah," said Bill, and caught her round the waist.

"Where shall we go?" said Babe thoughtfully.

Clym slipped on his waistcoat.

"I suggest a night club."

There was a chorus of approval. Tiny raised her eyes to heaven.

"A night club!—how absolutely marvellous! And, Clym—shall we be all among the harlotry?"

There was an instant's awkward silence and Clym coughed.

Tiny's blue eyes flitted from one to the other.

"That's all right, isn't it? I mean—you all say risqué things."

"Tiny," began Chris soothingly.

But Clym took charge.

"Tiny," he said, and the queer impassive face was suddenly transformed by the magic of his smile. "We must have one respectable member of the party, just to remind us of our fallen state."

"I thought it was rather good," she murmured woefully. "You talk of tenantry—why not of harlotry?—and I don't see why I shouldn't say clever things as well as anyone else."

"Because," said Clym, "you say one thing in a way that no one else can say it."

"What's that?"

"Why—'how absolutely marvellous'!"

Tiny hesitated, blinked, and smiled.

"No deep tones, Clym," said Babe.

He laughed.

"Deep tones!—you wonderful would-be blooms of

Bloomsbury—why, you'd all squeal like a lot of little bunnies if life ever hurt you—really hurt you."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Tiny. "And look here, Clym—I want real life, and they won't let me have it. They won't let me say clever things and Chris won't let me go out to work. Don't you think I ought to go out to work, especially now Chris is out of work?"

"But, my dear Tiny," protested Bill, "you simply can't work."

"I could be a mannequin."

"Mannequin!" exclaimed Chris. "My dear Tiny—keep sane—and anyway, I'm quite selfish in wanting to keep you at home. I must have my food cooked."

"Pooh!—you say my cooking's ghastly."

"So it is, dear, but my stomach's got used to it now. Really well-cooked food would make me bilious."

"Well, anyway," declared Tiny, "if you don't get a job within a week, I will—and that's that."

"In that case," said Chris, "I'd better start looking right away."

He picked up the *Daily Telegraph* from the table.

"I must change my braces," said Clym, and left the room. Tiny and Bill walked over to the window. Babe put her arm round Chris's shoulder and read the advertisement column with him.

"Ah!—here we are, Babe!"

"Where?"

"Here," he pointed with his finger.

"Wanted, young men of good appearance and address, to Demonstrate Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner. Good commission on sales. Apply Box 104."

She sighed.

"Commission!—Chris darling, surely the Blonde Star commission taught you a lesson?"

Tiny turned from the window.

"Why don't you try to get a real job, Chris dear——?"

"I do."

She joined him at the table, followed by Bill.

"Babe," she said, "is he trying?"

Babe did not answer.

Chris dropped the paper and sat on the edge of the table.

"I'll write one day—I feel it in my bones."

The door had opened and Clym heard the words.

"Will you?—have you written anything since I saw you last?"

Chris laughed awkwardly.

"Well—no—but——"

"Oh, it's always 'but,' Chris," said Tiny. A chorus of castigation and advice broke out. Chris listened, sitting with one leg crossed over the other and hands locked round his knee. A faint smile touched the corners of his lips.

Clym closed the attack.

"Modern life is like a suburban train, Chris. If you don't get a seat at the start, you stand all the way."

"Yes, and you'll realize it later on," said Bill from the security of his position as a junior (very junior) partner in his uncle's office. "Tiny and I'll be getting married one day and all this foursome business will be knocked on the head."

"And it's not fair to Babe not to try, Chris dear," added Tiny.

Chris looked at Babe.

"What do you say, Babe?"

But Babe said nothing. She just walked away and stared out of the window. Chris gave a slight laugh.

"Anyone would think I was thirty, instead of twenty!"

You're all mad on ruts—so frightfully keen to get settled down—worked into the pattern. Well, I'm not. I don't want to do what everyone else does—eat, sleep, and beget children—and get all dusty and moth-eaten, like the crowds of middle-aged men you see at Waterloo and Victoria, morning and evening. I want to breathe first, before I'm hemmed in. I'm not tamed yet, and I want to breathe. Babe—breathe with me, will you? ”

She ran back from the window.

“ Shut up bullying him—all of you ! ”

“ Well, I'm damned ! ” said Bill.

Chris laughed and slipped his arm round her.

“ Come on, let's all have—‘ Another and another cup, to drown The memory of this impertinence.’ ”

“ And let's go by taxi,” chimed in Tiny. “ I adore taxis.”

“ We are independent of taxis,” said Clym. “ I have bought a car.”

There was a chorus of scepticism, but Clym persisted :

“ It's in a garage in Old Dean Street.”

“ What brand is it? ”

“ A Baby Austin—secondhand.”

There was a chorus of derision, but Tiny took Clym's part. Slipping her arm through his, she glanced up at him.

“ Never mind, Clym dear, you shall take me out in it without your arm.”

“ Come on then—and let the others go by taxi.”

He folded his hand over hers and led her out of the room.

But at the garage opinion veered in Clym's favour.

“ It certainly looks all right,” said Bill. “ Does it go? ”

Clym made no answer. With a graceful undulation of the spine, he climbed in.

“ I say,” exclaimed Bill, “ it only seats three more.”

"Three seats and one pair of knees," answered Clym. That started an argument.

"It's your car, Babe," said Tiny. "You simply must take the seat. I'll sit on Bill."

"Thanks most frightfully, Tiny, but you are our guests, and you simply must take the seat—I'll sit on Chris."

"Not till we're married, darling," murmured Chris.

"Look here—let's toss for it," said Bill. "You call, Chris—heads Babe sits on you, tails Tiny sits on me."

There came an inhuman noise from the bonnet of the Austin and Clym's head popped out.

"Hurry up—she's a devil—I can hardly hold her."

The coin span and came down heads.

"Darling!" said Babe.

"Darling!" said Chris.

They embraced.

"Pigs!" said Tiny, and dived into the car with a bewildering revelation of silk-clad legs.

"Whoa!" muttered Clym and bent to reach a lever. His head hit the windscreen with a crack.

"Damn!"

"It's 'Triplex,'" said Chris.

The car jumped with a noise like banging tin.

"Isn't it wonderful?" murmured Babe. Her head rested on Chris's shoulder, her lips just touching his ear.

Tiny leant forward and tickled the back of Bill's neck.

There was another impact and a noise as of metallic evisceration.

"Damn!" said Clym again and peered down. "Anybody got a pickaxe handy?" he muttered.

"You've got a ladder in your stocking, Babe," whispered Chris.

"Where?" she murmured, breathing softly against his car.

"It's not visible."

"Chris, darling, don't be lascivious."

Then the car started and Clym nearly came over the back of his seat.

"Natty little bus," he muttered unenthusiastically.

It was a radiant evening. Every building, roof and spire stood out clear-edged against a sky of gold. The Mall was a straight shimmering causeway between the dusty plane trees. From the narrow mouth of the distant Admiralty Arch the long line of cars emerged, tiny, to loom larger and flash by, an endless multi-coloured procession: gay-tinted moths flitting ceaselessly round the great candle-flame of London.

Within the Austin was paradise. The wind rushed past them and they took off their hats, and their hair was blown and their cheeks kindled, and all about them was the roar of life in mechanical madness, beneath a dome of blue and gold.

"Oh, isn't it marvellous?" gasped Tiny, sitting forward, her blue eyes blinking in the rush of air, the yellow curls dancing madly on the crown of the dainty head.

"Um," purred Babe, and kissed Christopher's ear.

They were through the Admiralty Arch now, and flew up Cockspur Street, across the Square and round with the whirligig, past the National Gallery, down St. Martin's Lane, into the Square again, and up.

"We've done this bit before," gasped Bill.

"I thought so!" muttered Clym.

Twice they did the circle and each time they were lucky enough to escape the white-armed stop signal of the police.

"Where are we going?" murmured Babe.

"To heaven!" whispered Chris.

They were on the third lap now and the speedometer was quivering between 45 and 50.

"What's the idea?" gasped Bill.

"Progress," said Clym, and skated the corner to the National Gallery again. But on the fourth lap the traffic was held up. Clym wiped his forehead. A helmet appeared over the top of the windscreen.

"I! What's the game?"

"Game?" enquired Clym. "What game—officer?"

"Blindin' round 'ere four times—I seen yer—what's the game?—this ain't a dirt track."

Tiny peeped up at the stern young face beneath the helmet.

"Don't be cross with us!—we've only just bought it."

The constable straightened his back, genuflected, and jerked his head towards St. Martin's Church. The traffic was starting again.

"'Op it!" he said, and turned his back on them.

Clym dived at a lever; there was a metallic cough, the exhaust expectorated violently, the car shuddered and fell asleep.

The helmet appeared again.

"You 'eard what I said—'op it—before I take your number."

Tiny smiled wanly.

"It won't hop," she said.

The constable frowned.

"Put it away, then—it folds up, don't it?"

"Have you 'strangled' it?" enquired Bill.

"I'd like to," muttered Clym. "I've pulled and pushed everything."

"Where are we, Chris darling?" murmured Babe.

"In heaven!"

"Look 'ere," said the constable, "if it don't go——"

And then it went.

"Goodbye—ee—ee," called Tiny, standing up and waving over the back. They took the corner on two wheels and Tiny fell back upon Bill's hat.

"What about a drink?" said Bill.

"Please!" murmured Chris piteously.

They went to the Criterion.

CHAPTER TEN

“ I WANT that stuff with a cherry in it,” explained Tiny to the waiter. “ You know, a cherry with a toothpick stuck in it.”

“ Martini ! ” said the waiter.

“ Five Martinis,” corrected Clym.

“ May I have all the cherries ? ” said Tiny, when the tray arrived.

“ Would you prefer fruit salad ? ” enquired Chris.

“ Don’t be clever, Chris, or I’ll say something risqué again.”

She embraced the circle with one glance of the blue eyes.

“ Cherries—please ? ”

“ Wring them out well, first,” said Chris.

She ate the cherries languorously. Then she raised her glass.

“ To us ! ”

The brims chinked and five pairs of eyes closed dreamily. Tiny set down her glass and sighed.

“ Can I have another, Clym ? I want to feel deliciously swimmy.”

“ No, you can’t ! ” said Clym decisively, and stood up.

“ Sit down ! ” said Babe. “ I’m in the chair. Five more Martinis, waiter.”

She turned her face to the wall and fumbled mysteriously. Turning back, she put down a ten shilling note.

“ Where did that come from ? ” whispered Chris.

“ Hidden reserves, darling—the top of my stocking ! ”

"To think I was within an ace of making money!"

"Don't be coarse, Chris darling!"

Tiny washed down five more cherries. Then, leaning her elbows on the table, she looked vaguely into space.

"I'm beginning to feel most divinely sinful," she murmured.

"O tempora, O mores," muttered Clym.

They garaged the car and went for a walk round the shops. And then they missed Chris. Babe recovered him. He was standing in front of a big plate-glass window containing wax ladies in lingerie.

"You nasty little man!" she said, and led him away.

All the sky was on fire above the glaring white stone of the new Regent Street. Coloured sky signs, green, yellow, and red, were beginning to flicker. Outside the theatres, the lights were shining garishly in competition with the serene glow of evening. The crowd was becoming denser; big private cars more numerous. Workaday London had vanished. Play-by-night London was waking up.

"Oh, isn't it glorious?" murmured Tiny to Bill.

"Heavenly, sweetheart!"

"Babe," whispered Chris, "when we're married you must wear cami-knickers like those in the window."

"Yes, darling, but of course they're frightfully expensive—I couldn't wear them always."

"I shouldn't want you to, darling."

"Don't be coarse, darling!"

"Hungry?" enquired Clym.

"Starving!" they answered in unison.

It was just eight as they reached the Blue Bottle.

Tiny stared round at the large, low-ceilinged room, tricked out in gilt paint and encrusted with small mirrors set in diamond-shaped frames. It was practically empty.

"There aren't many people, are there?" she whispered to Clym.

"It's early. Besides, night clubs are frightfully dull. They are built for people who are dull. They come here to avoid their dullness, and bring it with them. But the food's good and the wine's excellent."

"Wine?" she looked up expectantly.

Clym smiled.

"One glass only—you pretty baby," he said and pulled her little ear.

A stout and pallid waiter approached Clym deferentially.

"Good evening, sair."

"Good evening, Henri—for five—where we can't be seen. I'm getting old and respectable, Henri."

Henri's pale blue eyes vanished in the clammy wrinkles of a smile.

"Respectable—perhaps: old, sair, nevaire—while we keep Chambertin."

"Cham——what?" enquired Tiny.

"——Bertin, not ——pagne," said Clym, and led them in the wake of Henri.

They were all rather noisy, "but nicely noisy," as Tiny put it. Henri hovered assiduously, ready with his napkin and his advice—discreet advice, given in such a way as to suggest that he would only give it to just a very few people; which was, in truth, the case. Very few people gave Henri a tip commensurate with his stock of cuisine-lore. Among the few was Clym.

The table was in a corner and they sat, Chris and Babe with their backs to one wall; Bill and Tiny with their backs to the other. In the angle formed by the two, sat Clym. It was an admirable arrangement. They could all see each other and all see the room, with its square in the centre, left clear for dancing.

A blasé quartet—saxophone, piano, violin, and drum—syncopated sadly on a small raised dais. Clym hid a yawn, but it passed unnoticed. The four were wildly hilarious under the influence of good food and better wine. Clym watched them impassively. Tiny's pretty cheeks were flushed and the blue eyes hectically sparkling.

"I'm simply dying to get on that floor, Bill," she said.

"I can wait for the sweet," interposed Clym, "have a shuffle, all of you, it will aid digestion."

In an instant they were gone. They had the floor to themselves. The quartet woke up a little and the music quickened its seductive beat.

Clym watched them, a cigarette lolling from the corner of his mouth, his fingers parted about the stem of his wine-glass.

Two inverted bowls hung from the centre of the ceiling, casting a bright light upon the dancing floor. Beyond were the tables, in a dimmer, more confidential light. They were filling up now, with couples and parties, some in evening dress. Heads were turned to watch the dancers.

Sinuously graceful, they moved to the queer broken rhythm of the cymbals and the drum; two fair heads, two dark, and slim young bodies closely pressed, blue eyes and black, languorous, abandoned to the subtle drone of the sensual saxophone.

Tiny and Bill passed him. He caught a glimpse of her face. The little curly head lay in the crook of her partner's arm, the small breasts were flattened against him, and at each dip and movement the slim hips tilted, and the soft material of her dress was pressed tight against the slim thighs. They passed and Bill had his back to the table, and over his shoulder the blue eyes were just visible, softened to a dreamy content.

Clym raised his glass and drank and then a woman's voice said;

"Hello, Clym!"

It was a soft, lazy voice, rather deep in tone. Clym looked up.

"Hello, Sylvia!" he said, rising.

"May I sit here for a moment—even though you're not glad to see me?"

Clym smiled.

"Or you to see me, eh?—but please stay. I thought you were in Monte Carlo."

She sighed.

"I was, but it was too inexpressibly dull with Stephen."

"It always becomes too inexpressibly dull, finally, doesn't it?"

"Always," she murmured, and stifled a faint yawn.

He glanced at her obliquely as she sat, her elbows on the table, her hands gracefully folded to support her chin. She was in an evening dress, *ultra décolletée*, and the light shone upon the white satin skin of back and bosom. How marvellously well she wore, he mused. Not a furrow in the neck, hardly a line upon the face, except for those faint threadlike lines just visible at the corners of the voluptuous mouth.

"Are you alone, Sylvia?"

"Yes. I went to the theatre with Dickie, but we quarrelled. I simply cannot sit through a whole performance at an English theatre. It is the audience, I think. The stalls are bad enough—stolid virtue gaping at histrionic vice—it was one of Maugham's plays—and then one always knows that behind one is the pit—and the English pit is bottomless. One can hear their laughter when one is almost prepared to pay the author the compliment of an undiluted tear; and one can just get the scent of them—chocolates and shampoo—I told Dick not to make it a

Friday—the pit always shampoos on Friday nights—the advertisement says so.”

Clym laughed quietly. She was as changeless as Time itself, he mused. She talked now as she had talked ten years ago—but how different it sounded!

“Will you take wine, Sylvia?”

She nodded.

“You know, Clym, you were the nicest of them all—you were so graceful in your exit.”

“Exit or exile?”

She laughed softly.

“No nostalgia, Clym.”

Henri set down another glass.

“You know why I’ve really come to speak to you, don’t you?” She smiled over the brim.

“I guessed that there was an ulterior motive.”

“There is. I’ve fallen in love with those two adorable curly-headed babes who are dining with you.”

Clym’s thin lips compressed.

“Verboten, my dear,” he answered drily.

She laughed.

“You’re not after the girl, are you?”

“No, and you mustn’t pet the boy—it wouldn’t be good for him.”

She smiled thoughtfully.

“He really is a perfect Adonis.”

“He is practically engaged to my sister.”

She turned her head slowly.

“Clym dear, surely—have you been sitting in the pit?—I don’t want to marry him!”

The music stopped and the children flocked back to the table, laughing and talking. Babe glanced at Sylvia disapprovingly, Tiny wonderingly, Bill sceptically, and Chris uneasily.

Clym bowed to the inevitable.

"Mrs. Brent," he said to the children collectively, and as each greeted her he gave their names.

The meal was resumed, and Sylvia Brent moving along, found herself next to Chris.

"You dance well, Mr. Barrymore," she said, smiling at him over one smooth bare shoulder.

"Do I?—" stammered Chris.

"He trod on my feet three times, anyway," said Babe.

Sylvia raised her eyebrows.

"Crushed toes are not always due to the male," she said gently.

Babe flushed.

And then a man's voice broke in.

"Hello, Goolan—why, Sylvia too—forgive me, Sylvia, I thought you were in Monte Carlo."

Clym's dark eyebrows contracted and he nodded curtly at the new-comer. He was a tall, fair man, about forty years of age. He had rather deep-set blue eyes and a noticeably prominent chin. The mouth was a good shape, but he drew attention to it by a mannerism that led him constantly to moisten the rather full lips. He was in evening dress, and knew it.

But he talked well. Interpreting Clym's curt nod to suit his own convenience, he took a chair facing Sylvia, and in doing so sat next to Tiny. He talked to everybody, but in some way he contrived to look at Tiny, no matter whom he spoke to. Clym became morose. The last man he wanted the children to meet was Derick Kilbey.

The last course was eaten and then Kilbey ordered wine.

"I must pay my footing, Goolan," he said smiling, "and the younger generation dance, and Chambertin is no wine to dance on in August. Henri——"

Henri bowed, and returned with two bottles in an ice-bucket. Clym wanted to say something to Tiny, but Sylvia was looking at him—amusement in the heavy blue eyes.

The wine was poured out and the glasses raised.

"Oh!—isn't it heavenly?" said Tiny, glancing up at Kilbey with big blue grateful eyes.

Kilbey smiled.

"It's the wine to dance on, isn't it?"

"I'd do a hornpipe if I had two glasses!"

And then the music began again. Bill and Chris rose to the occasion. Kilbey and Sylvia were left with Clym. Kilbey turned his head to watch Tiny's slim little figure beneath the brilliant light.

When the children returned to the table, there was more wine.

"Steady on, all," said Clym.

"He's getting old," murmured Sylvia in Chris's ear. And Chris's ears were already burning from the wine.

Kilbey was talking to Tiny, and Tiny was talking to the world. Just then she wanted to talk to the world and to tell the world how delicious she felt inside and all over. Bill kept nudging her knee but she seemed not to notice it. Chris's name came up, and after his name, his literary ambitions.

Sylvia smiled sleepily at him.

"Do you really want to write?" she said.

"Of course—I mean—one day."

"Novels?"

"Well—er—yes, I think so."

"One needs experience to write novels, doesn't one?—real experience. Have you had enough to write a really modern novel?"

Chris turned forgetfully from Babe.

"I've got a wonderful imagination," he said eagerly.

"Have you?" The voice was soft and enigmatic, and suddenly Chris felt himself blushing.

And then someone called Bill's name, and a young fellow in evening dress joined them.

"Fancy seeing you here!—good Lord! and Babe. I say, you simply must come over to my table for a minute. I've got Babs with me—er—we're engaged." He glanced at the others: "Will you excuse them a moment?"

Reluctantly Bill and Babe stood up, hesitated, and went. Then the music started again.

"May I, Miss Barrymore?" said Kilbey.

Tiny hesitated, glanced at Clym, looked back and nodded. They went.

Chris gulped off his wine. Sylvia was silent. He did not know what to do. He supposed he ought to ask her. Sylvia turned her head and smiled.

"May I, Mrs. Brent?"

"Please," murmured Sylvia.

They went.

Clym said "Damnation" under his breath.

Sitting back, he watched them dancing. Tiny seemed to be almost engulfed by Kilbey. The curly head was just visible above his bent arm; the slim body was bent like a sapling. But the floor was crowded now and it was only at odd intervals that he saw either of the twins. And then he did not see them at all.

Uneasily, he stood up. Chris would be all right, but Tiny—not that anything serious threatened her, but something unpleasant might. He edged his way round the dancers to the door. Without was a lounge, of glass mirrors, dimmer lights, palm trees and wicker chairs, all occupied. There was nothing he could do. He could not peep round each palm to see if Tiny were concealed behind one.

Muttering angrily, he strolled back to the restaurant and stood in the doorway watching the dancers.

And then suddenly the twins appeared together. They passed without seeing him and he had to stretch out an arm to stop them. In doing so, he noticed that Tiny held her brother's arm. They swung round sharply and Tiny blushed crimson. The lashes of the blue eyes glistened faintly in the bright light.

"What's wrong?" said Clym.

"Nothing," answered Chris stubbornly. "Tiny's tired—she wants to go home."

"Where's Kilbey?" persisted Clym.

"He's gone."

"And Sylvia?"

"I don't know. I—er—I left her . . . in the lounge."

Clym nodded, moodily.

It was a very subdued party that drove back to Chelsea. Clym heard much whispering at the back. When he reached the twins' flat he was dismissed kindly, but firmly.

Chris did it.

"Thanks awfully for the evening, Clym. Bill and Babe are staying the night with us."

"Good idea," muttered Clym, and drove away.

Once in the small sitting-room, Tiny gave way to an outburst of passionate tears. Half sitting, half lying on the couch, she buried her face in the big cushions.

Bill knelt down and tried to take her in his arms, but she clung to the back of the couch and her muffled voice kept repeating:

"Go away, Bill darling, go away!"

Bill glanced over his shoulder.

"What actually has happened, Chris?"

Tiny swung round.

"He . . . he . . . kissed me . . . beastily . . . and oh, Billy darling! . . . you won't want to kiss me ever again!"

"Swine!" said Bill. "Darling!" he added, and took her in his arms.

"Chris dear—what did happen?" said Babe.

"Well, I was sitting with that Brent woman in the lounge, and I saw Kilbey and Tiny walking towards the balcony—the windows were open—it was so hot."

"But, Chris dear," broke in Tiny, showing her wet cheeks over Bill's shoulder, "I didn't know . . . he . . . was going to kiss me. He just said . . . we'd have a cigarette, 'cos it was so hot inside."

Bill soothed her and the blue eyes vanished.

"So I left the Brent woman," continued Chris.

"Good!" said Babe fervently.

"I'd a feeling Kilbey was sham, somehow—he looked cheap beside old Clym—so I just said 'Excuse me' to the Brent woman and nipped out on the balcony."

Tiny's head popped up again, the blue eyes shining.

"He was simply marvellous, Babe—Chris was—he just hit him—marvellously!"

Babe flung her arms round Chris's neck.

"You beautiful pugilistic cherub!" she said, and kissed him.

And then they all laughed and Bill unfolded Tiny and she sat up.

"What's the time?" she said, with a little pink yawn.

Bill looked at his watch.

"One a.m."

"Chris," said Babe, "one more question."

"Yes?"

"If . . . if you hadn't seen Tiny with Kilbey, would you have left the Brent woman?"

"I want notice of that question," said Chris.

"Then you can't have it.—Yes or no?"

Chris smiled.

"My dear Babe—she was over-ripe."

She sighed gratefully.

"You may kiss me just there," she said and pointed with one finger to her lips.

After that, they drew the chintz curtains and pulled up the arm-chairs and the couch, and brought out the small table and set cups and saucers. And Tiny and Babe went to the diminutive kitchen to make coffee.

Bill passed his cigarette case.

"Good bit of work, Chris, hitting that fellow."

Chris nodded.

"Bit dramatic, though."

"Quite—but damnably satisfying."

"Absolutely damnably delightful!"

The coffee was exquisite and they all yawned and sighed, and smoked cigarettes and got drowsy, and kissed and dozed.

Finally, Tiny shook herself.

"Come along, Babe, we'll go to bed."

They went.

The two men talked a little, in rather grown-up voices.

"Who is this Brent woman?" said Chris.

"Humph! An old flame of Clym's, I suppose."

"Poor Clym—it must be rotten to be too old for any woman under thirty-five."

"I fancy he's too old, even for them, now."

"I should say he's had a good innings."

"Quite—but thank God!—it hasn't made him turn moral."

There was a creak of a door, and a soft voice called:

"You may both come and kiss us good-night."

They found them cuddled up in the small bed, black hair and golden, against the two white pillows. The bedclothes

were drawn up to their chins, but blue eyes and black were smiling, and the lips of both were waiting.

“ Darling ! ” murmured Chris.

“ Darling ! ” murmured Bill.

The darlings sighed gratefully.

“ Night-night ! ” they said and closed their eyes.

The brothers closed the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHRISTOPHER did not make a success of his appointment with the Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner Company. It was a small concern trying to compete with larger ones by selling an inferior article at a lower cost, and Chris had not mastered the art of selling something that was not worth buying.

Nor did the *modus operandi* appeal to him. He had to canvas a new suburb; an area of crucified fields, scaffold poles and a maze of red-brick Tudor residences, some completed, some still rising from a wilderness of seeding thistles and dying ragwort. And in each completed house he found a recently acquired wife, trying to support herself and her husband on a housekeeping allowance that represented the balance of salary left after supporting the house. It went to Christopher's heart to have to tempt them to buy a Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner. They were always so nice to him. At first the door would open suspiciously, but when he raised his hat and smiled, it was always opened wide. Similarly, when he first started talking about the cleaner the wise little heads would shake, and then he would sigh and look like a ruined man, and after that they would listen in rapt sympathy. And after they had listened, he usually managed to arrange a demonstration. He hated demonstrations. In official language they were called "dems," and "dems" involved carrying the machine down to the house and showing how effective it was.

It was carrying the machine that really put Chris off the

work. It was heavy and hideous, and consisted of a long handle attached to a metal container. What the container contained, Chris did not know, but he thought, from the weight, that it was probably equal parts of concrete and lead. In addition, there was a length of thoroughly recalcitrant hose-pipe, covered with light wire. Clym called the whole thing "the flammenwerfer." But Chris did not laugh. After all, it was he who had to carry it, and carrying it was no mean feat. He had tried all ways, but practically all of them involved a risk of internal injuries. Finally he discovered that the only effective way was to put the container over his shoulder and hold the handle at an angle, like a bricklayer's hod. And even that was troublesome in a crowd. The handle would stick out and make people in front of him turn suddenly—and, if they were women, indignantly. Then he would depress the handle frantically, and the container would crack him smartly at the base of the skull, and at the same time knock his hat over his eyes, just as he was about to raise it in apology.

But once he got the contrivance into one of the small sitting-rooms, he was happier. To and fro he would trundle it, talking the while brightly and briskly. What he said was almost inaudible, because the machine made a noise that sounded like a duet between a threshing machine and a traction engine. But Chris kept on talking. The manager had told him to keep talking.

"Salesmanship is principally talking, Mr. Barrymore," he had said. "Never give 'em time to think or they won't buy."

But he never sold one. As soon as ever he saw one of the recently acquired wives showing signs of weakness, he gave way himself. They were most of them very young—some of them very pretty, and to see a young and pretty face betraying agonized indecision between the desire to save

work and the need to save money completely unmanned Chris.

Each "dem" ended the same way, with a little speech from Chris. The speeches varied verbally, but they generally went something like this:

"Of course, it's a pretty dud machine really. I mean, I wouldn't be seen dead with one in my own house. If you must buy a vacuum cleaner, get a decent one—a 'Radex' or a 'Vallaped'—they're more expensive, but they're worth having—whereas this thing"—here he would slap the handle harshly—"well—it's the world's worst vacuum cleaner. To begin with, it doesn't clean; and then, it's a terrible weight—I've carried it, so I know—and then you've heard what a frightful row it makes, and furthermore, it's guaranteed to wear out any carpet within a month."

After that, some of them would smile, and some of them laugh, and most of them would give him a cup of tea to refresh him before he staggered away with his electric incubus. Such methods earned him gratitude, but no commission.

And then he had an accident. It happened in one of the Tube stations. He was travelling down an escalator at the time, and to ease his intolerable burden he had shifted the "flammenwerfer" from his shoulder and was holding it across his body, as Punch holds his truncheon. He was dreaming of Babe as he sank slowly and drowsily with the stairs. And then the "flammenwerfer" gave a jump and a chorus of explosive voices broke out. Chris awoke from his dreams. He had forgotten the people who were coming up, and by the time he was reminded of them the handle of the "flammenwerfer" had swept off two bowler hats, a cap and a toque. Horrified, he raised the handle with a jerk, and the Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner escaped from his grasp. It bounded once, with a hollow boom, and then it

leaped like a centaur from step to step, vomiting a shower of wheels and springs that leaped and bounded with it. Chris leapt and bounded after it, but by the time he had reached the bottom the e was little left of the "flammenwerfer" except its sinister handle.

He took one glance upward. A number of people were trying to walk down stairs that were ascending. There was a good deal of shouting going on, but the people themselves were stationary.

He bolted, dived for a train, narrowly escaped being eviscerated by the closing doors, and flopped into a seat, breathing heavily. At the next station he got out, ran up the escalator, and went to earth in a café.

But he heard no more of the incident, except from the Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner Company. And they only charged him trade price.

As Clym said, he had come out of the episode very well.

"After all, you've been employed a fortnight and it's only cost you four pounds ten, plus expenses."

"Quite," said Chris, "a mere bagatelle, considering how Nature abhors a vacuum."

They were in the twins' sitting-room, with Tiny, Bill, and Babe. The last-named stood accusingly with their backs to the fireplace. Chris and Clym were on the couch.

"Chris," said Bill kindly, "don't you think it'd be a good idea if you tried a spot of real work?"

"I'll write, one day."

"Yes, Chris dear," said Tiny soothingly, "we know that, but—in the meantime—what about a job with a salary?"

"A salary means working indoors," said Chris.

"But, Chris darling——" began Babe.

Chris looked at her reproachfully.

"*Et tu Brute?*"

Tiny crossed to the couch and sat down resolutely.

"This is absurd, Chris," she said firmly, "you've got to find work—with a salary—regular hours and indoors."

"When winter comes," said Chris.

Babe laughed softly.

"Good enough, Chris, and it's summer now—let's not bother about jobs. It's only six o'clock—what shall we do?"

"Well," said Chris tentatively, "the custom is, when I lose a job, to celebrate it."

Clym raised a protesting hand.

"Impossible. I've got to buy a new arm."

Tiny opened her blue eyes wide.

"Clym darling—have you really lost it this time?"

"Absolutely! It went last night—but it's a long story."

Chris stood up.

"We must hear it—and anyway I meant the celebration to be here—it's our turn—what have we got, Tiny?"

"Only sardines."

Chris turned to Clym.

"Feel like a bit of fish?"

"Half a minute," said Babe. She turned her back and fumbled mysteriously with her skirt.

"Can I help?" said Chris urgently.

She turned round again.

"Thanks, it's done."

She put down a pound note on the table.

"Five at the Green Grasshopper will cost 12s. 6d.—that leaves 7s. 6d. for a bottle of alc."

"No," said Chris firmly, "I drew a cheque to-day to pay for the vacuum cleaner—in cash—I don't want the name to pass through my account."

He produced ten ten-shilling notes,

Bill elbowed his way forward,

"It's my shout, anyway; and, Tiny, make Chris put that money into an envelope now and address it."

Tiny led Chris to the table and made him sit down. Babe brought paper and an envelope. Clym supplied the stamp.

Then they all walked to the Green Grasshopper, registering and posting the letter on the way.

"Now I feel a free man," said Chris, as they took their table. "And I insist on celebrating. Here's the change, and we're going to have a bottle of alc."

"What is this 'alc'?" enquired Clym.

"It's short for 'alcohol,' Clym darling," said Tiny. "Ever tasted alcohol?—it's awfully nice."

"I once rubbed my arm with it," said Clym.

"Oh—do tell us about the arm!"

Clym leant back.

"It happened last night. Briggs is responsible. He went to an Old Comrades' reunion dinner—they are rather frequent, he seems to have served in many regiments, but I don't discourage him. The trouble is that when he goes to an Old Comrades' dinner he always forgets the war is over. He thinks he's back at Loos," he turned to Chris and Tiny. "He brought me in at Loos, Briggs did. It's not the only time he's brought me in, but it was the only time when it was really necessary. At other times—well, it's just over-anxiety. He came back last night thinking he was still at Loos—he looked rather like it too. I was in bed, but when he thinks he's at Loos he always thinks my bed's a shell-hole. I don't much mind, except that he always wants to lift me out of it and put me in a place of safety—the lift shaft, for preference—he thinks it's a deep dugout on these occasions. But he's largely automatic—I've only to say, 'Company—dis—miss!', and he stops, salutes, and leaves me in my shell-hole. But last night he had a shock, I was rather

late myself—one or two friends—and a bottle of ‘alc’—and—I got a bit messed up with my arm. It usually comes off when I take off my coat, but last night it stayed on till I’d got my coat half off, and then it came off, and I was rather confused. It got round my waist, somehow, and made me giggle, and my coat was round back to front and generally everything was out of order. I got a little peevish, I admit, and danced and kicked a bit, and finally I must have thrown them under the bed—coat and arm complete. When Briggs came home, he looked in, just to see if I wanted rescuing again. I sat up when the light went on, but he didn’t even see me. He was staring at the floor—his eyes out on wires. I glanced down too, feeling a little anxious. It was my arm—it stuck out from beneath the bed, the hand clenched—apparently I had trodden on it. I tried to explain, but Briggs didn’t give me time.

“ ‘All right, Sir!’ he said, never taking his eyes off the hand, ‘don’t move, Sir—stay just where you are, Sir—the rotten——!’ Ahem!—an Army expression, used by privates of sergeants. Then he began a sort of stealthy catch-as-catch-can dance step. The situation was out of my control, so I entered into the spirit of the thing. ‘At ’im, Briggs!’ I said, and Briggs dived. ‘Got ’im!’ he cried, and tugged with all his might. He used to be a P.T. Instructor, but he excelled himself just then. He turned a complete somersault, and the arm flew over his head and out of the window. I was a bit worried, and switched out the light. Briggs was muttering in the corner—something about the barrage. I peeped out of the window. Beneath was a policeman. He held my arm—he was not the first to do so. I waited. It was a tense moment—but fortunately Briggs had pulled the visiting card off when he struggled. When I peeped out again, the policeman was walking away, with my arm under his arm—a sort of vicarious arrest, which

gave me a sense of great comfort. I shall not try to recover it. Ah!—the alc—Chris, to the next job you lose!”

But Chris did not lose another job for a long time; the reason being that he did not get one. He answered dozens of advertisements but nobody answered him. Each morning, after he had written, he and Tiny would rush to the door when the postman came, only to return disconsolate.

“We’d better get a bill file, I think,” said Chris.

“What about paying some of them, Chris dear?”

“When winter comes.”

And then they would make a cup of tea and discuss the new day’s delights.

There was such an enormous amount to do that had never been done before. Babe had her mornings filled at the Burling School of Art. Most afternoons she was busy too, but now and again she could join them, and always they had tea at a little café facing the Royal Academy.

It was a café patronized by the students, and the twins would sit and listen. They heard names that they had never heard before, and heard them as though they knew them intimately—Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, and others—artists, apparently, who had had the misfortune not to be taught at the Burling School of Art. Once Babe took Chris to the Students’ Room, and showed him some of their work—nudes principally, male and female.

It was a big gaunt room, with the canvases hung round the walls, dozens and dozens of them, all nudes.

Chris was not quite sure about Art. He questioned her.

“Do you mean to say that a lot of fellows and girls sit about together, with—er—these models—like that—in front of them?”

“Of course, darling.”

“Humph! It sounds all right, but—I’m not sure I’m I’m keen on the idea.”

"You're a nasty little man, Chris. It's because you can't see a nude body without thinking of sex—an artist can."

"You don't call those fellows you mix with artists, do you?"

"Two or three of them will be, one day—especially Pender—the boy with the lovely dark eyes."

"Lovely dark eyes!—really, Babe!"

Chris did not like Pender. He did not like his untidy clothes and his big tie, and his long, sensitive fingers, and long black hair. And he positively hated his voice—a rather soft, languid voice that became very languid when he spoke to Chris and very soft when he spoke to Babe.

"Pender!" he resumed. "I can see him being content to do nothing more than paint a nude woman!"

She smiled slyly at him but he did not see it. They were in the Green Park, beneath the shade of a plane tree, and the sun filtered through the leaves and set little shadows at the corners of his lips, to accentuate the lines that petulance had already set there.

"You sweet little sulky Philistine!" she said softly.

"Philistine?" He turned his head quickly.

"Yes—when a Philistine thinks of Art, he always thinks of the artist's model. And having thought of the model, he can only think of her in one way, so he accuses the artist of thinking as he does. And then he brands him as immoral, for every Philistine is at heart a Puritan, and a Puritan calls everything immoral that gives the opportunity to be immoral; because his own morality is nothing but lack of opportunity."

And suddenly Chris smiled and the petulant lines vanished.

"You're right, Babe!" he paused and sighed. "I wish I could paint!—the nude, preferably."

"And if you could—would you?"

"With intervals."

So the summer wore on and life was very pleasant.

Tiny was radiantly happy. In a year's time the balance of the furniture money was due, and in the meantime she was spending five shillings a week on newspaper competitions, and any morning she might wake to find herself worth a thousand pounds or entitled to three pounds a week for life.

Chris had begun a novel. He did not say very much about it, but one day when he had completed three chapters he took them round to Babe.

She had managed to get some picture-postcard work, and was very busy and very contemptuous.

"Of course, it's just pot-boiling stuff," she explained, "but it means money."

She sat, bent over a small table, her tongue just peeping out of the corner of her mouth as she worked.

Chris opened the manuscript and cleared his throat.

"I want your candid opinion, of course," he said nonchalantly.

"Of course, darling." She did not look up.

But Chris looked down. She sat with one leg doubled under her. The other was visible beyond even the generous limits allowed by fashion.

"I don't think I've ever seen such marvellous legs as yours, Babe."

She put her brush in her mouth and looked at him.

"Have you tried to?"

Chris cleared his throat.

"Chapter One," he said.

Babe went on painting.

He read, at first a little uncertainly; later, with confidence. At the end of the first chapter he paused. Babe went on working.

"You're listening, aren't you, Babe?"

She nodded.

He read Chapter Two.

"You don't seem frightfully moved."

She glanced up uneasily.

"Well, darling—it's only Chapter Two, isn't it?"

"True. I will now read Chapter Three."

He did so.

"That's as far as I've got," he said, and sat back.

She put down her brushes and turning round in her chair faced him.

"I'm afraid, Chris darling, it's—well, it won't do."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Well—er—it's the women who are all wrong. I mean, darling, women aren't always undressing. I mean, darling, you've got three of them, and two of them are—naked—before the end of the second chapter."

He nodded.

"Yes—I noticed that," he said musingly. "They simply will undress—my women will."

"Your women would!"

"Yes, I believe they would—but I never seem to meet my women."

She laughed, reluctantly.

"You little beast!—I believe you'd love a harem."

"In rotation," said Chris deprecatingly.

She looked out of the window and sighed. Then she looked back again.

"Why don't you write something funny, Chris darling? I believe you could."

"When winter comes," said Chris, and tore up the manuscript.

A week later, Tiny and Bill announced their intention of having a little dinner together somewhere in Soho. They did not say they wished to dine alone, but as for the first time

in the history of their Soho dinners they did not suggest that Chris and Babe should come with them, Chris and Babe dined alone too.

They dined on sausages and mashed potatoes in the twins' flat. It was rather a lugubrious evening. Somewhere in Soho two people were dining together, where before there had always been four.

After supper, Babe played the piano. Then they turned on the wireless, and for ten mournful minutes syncopated sadly to a very indistinct jazz orchestra playing from some hotel where no one had ever eaten sausages and mashed, and everyone could afford to marry, if they had not already done so. But the accumulators gave out, and the music ceased, so they had a whisky and soda each—the last of the whisky and the first of the soda.

Then they nearly cried with self-pity and, recovering, went out and became suicidal by looking at the dark oily river below the Chelsea Embankment.

Bill was due at twelve to bring Tiny back and take his sister home, so at eleven they gave up considering suicide and returned to the flat.

They let down the end of the couch, put numbers of cushions at one end, and lay down in each others arms, and kissed, and babbled about the day when they would be married, and kissed again, and grew drowsy and fell asleep.

They were roused by the electric light flashing on, and sat up, rather dishevelled and flushed, and cross-eyed.

But Tiny and Bill were too full of themselves to notice anyone else.

"Listen!" cried Tiny. "We're engaged!"

She put out her hand.

"Look!—Isn't it absolutely marvellous!"

They looked. The light twinkled from a single diamond set in platinum and gold.

"Who paid for it?" said Babe.

"I did," said Bill coldly.

"Where on earth did you get the money from?"

Bill smiled.

"Saved every penny of it. I began from the day I first met Tiny."

"Darling!" said Tiny, and hid him from view.

Babe looked at Chris.

"Er—I must start saving," said Chris hurriedly.

She stood up.

"Come on, Bill—I'm tired."

Tiny released him.

"You don't seem a bit pleased, Babe."

For an instant Babe hesitated.

"Oh, I am, Tiny!" she said impulsively, and took her in her arms. But as she kissed her, she hid her face in the soft fur collar of Tiny's cloak. "Let me stay here a moment," she whispered.

Tiny sighed.

"Get Bill a drink, Chris."

The brothers went to the kitchen.

"What's the matter?" said Tiny gently.

"Nothing." The voice was muffled in the soft fur. Tiny pressed her cheek close.

"He's all right, really, Babe . . . only . . . well, it's the way Father brought him up."

The black head nodded.

"He's a darling—only——" The black head popped up: "Don't you tell him I cried!"

When the brothers returned she was laughing.

"Bill," exclaimed Tiny, "we're all going down to Okebourne for the week-end, to tell them."

"Good!"

Very diffidently, Chris put out his hand and took Babe's.

She let him draw her to his side. Tiny and Bill were discussing the arrangements for the week-end.

"Babe, you've been crying," whispered Chris.

"I haven't!"

"You have!"

She blinked, and the telltale light glistened on the long dusky lashes.

"Babe . . . I . . . I'll get a job—as soon as I can . . . a real job."

Bill turned his head.

"Ahem! Are you ready, Babe?"

"Quite," she said breathlessly.

Tiny saw them out. When she returned to the sitting-room, Chris was sitting on the couch, smoking. She took off her cloak and stood for a moment in front of the mirror above the mantelpiece, her hands raised to her hair.

Chris watched her. She was in an evening dress of black georgette that left bare her shoulders and arms. She had never looked more dainty, and yet with it all went an element of immaturity that in some way gave him a feeling akin to pain.

"Tiny!"

She looked round.

"When are you and Bill going to marry?"

She hesitated, and came and stood before him, her arms drooping, her hands folded in the faint hollow between the slim thighs.

"Not for ever so long, Chris—years, I expect."

"I see," he said carelessly, and stood up. "I suppose we'd better go to bed."

She glanced at him uneasily and suddenly caught his hands in hers.

"You're . . . you're not sorry about it all—are you, Chris?"

He smiled faintly.

"Do you remember the night we slept in the punt?"

"Of course—I'll never forget those days."

"Do you remember what you said?"

She puckered her little forehead and shook her head.

"I'll quote you, Tiny—'One day we'll probably both marry, and then this will be washed right out, won't it?'"

She nodded her head slowly, and sighed.

"Yes . . . but——" She put her arms on his shoulders and gave him a little shake. "Chris dear—I don't think that's quite fair, because . . . you've got Babe, haven't you?"

"Babe and I are different, Tiny—I can't explain quite just how we are different, but we are—and——" he broke off suddenly and kissed her.

"It's an awful shame to talk like this—just now—and I'm really awfully glad about you and Bill."

He set her free and walked over to the window. It was open and outside the sky was overcast—a black dome wanly glowing to the eastward, where the heart of London beat and burned. Below, a few taxis were bowling westward and an empty 'bus roared by.

It was cool and dark, and he leant his elbows on the sill; and the words came back to him—words he had often read in his bedroom at Okebourne and in the shadow of the beech trees of the hanger, until he could repeat them now without the book. He spoke them in a low voice. He liked to quote poetry aloud—it was the only way to hear its real music.

*"Haply on strange roads I shall be, the moorlands' peace
around me;*

Or counting up a fortune to which Destiny hath bound me;

Or—Vanity of vanities—the honey of the Fair;

*Or a greybeard, lost to memory, on the cobbles in my chair—
How shall I know that the end of things is coming——"*

"Chris!"

He turned back into the room.

"What were you saying, Chris?"

She looked at him uneasily, her head a little on one side.

He smiled faintly.

"I was only muttering—I do mutter sometimes—I'm getting old."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE week-end at Okebourne began unpropitiously. Clym offered to drive Tiny and Bill down in the Austin. He was apologetic:

"I'd take you all," he said, "but I'm afraid the shock-absorbers wouldn't stand it."

Chris nodded nonchalantly. He always took refuge in nonchalance when he felt depressed or disappointed. And the proposal had made him feel both. It was the first time he had realized that in future, whenever Tiny had to choose between Bill and himself, she would choose Bill. He knew it was right that she should: he knew it was wrong that he should resent it. But instincts were stronger than arguments, and he felt depressed and disappointed. Not even the knowledge that he would have Babe with him compensated him for the absence of Tiny. At present, the ties of blood were stronger than the call of sex. It was the last flickering glimmer of adolescence.

But he was not going to admit his feelings.

"We shall prefer to go down by train," he said carelessly. "We shan't get there till about an hour after you two, and we shall escape the worst of the congratulations. The subconscious eroticism of the old, which is always aroused by the betrothals and nuptials of the young, will have subsided a little."

"Oh yes?" said Clym.

But when they found themselves alone in a compartment of the two-thirty from Waterloo to Oastington, both were

gloomily taciturn. They had done the journey so often with Tiny and Bill, and it had been so essential a part of the week-end's enjoyment.

Chris stared out of the window, watching the flying hedges, and the slow rotation of the fields, swinging round on the hub of the horizon as the train sped on.

Babe began to whistle, but as Chris did not seem to hear, she sighed—a sigh that was more audible than the whistle.

Chris looked at her.

“What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes, there is—you’re fed up because Tiny’s engaged.”

He hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Well—and what if I am.”

She shrugged her shoulders too.

“Nothing,” she said coolly, and looked out of the window.

They passed five fields, a village and a station, before they spoke again. Then Chris said:

“I can’t think why on earth they wanted to be in such a hurry. We were all all right as things were, and now they’ll start that sort of heavy mystery business and go sneaking off by themselves everywhere.”

“I don’t see why they should.”

“Nor do I—but they will—and it’s so ridiculous, Tiny is only twenty.”

“Some girls are married at twenty.”

There was a note of asperity in the voice. The face was in profile, the little *retroussé* nose very close to the window.

“Yes, and thoroughly tamed at twenty-one. I can see it all coming. In a year or two they’ll have a crazy pavement and a crazy baby and a Multiflux vacuum cleaner.”

She turned her head quickly, her cheeks warm.

"And you, by that time, may have got your first real job!"

Chris coloured too.

"It's all very well—holding Bill up as an example—he's had a decent education and a decent father and a job to go to."

She jumped up and kissed him.

"Sorry, Chris darling!" she said, and smiled.

He smiled back and drew her down beside him.

"Don't get impatient with me, Babe. I must expand a bit at first—but when I contract——!"

"Oh . . . Chris darling! . . . please. I can't breathe."

"Do you want to?"

"No!"

When they reached the vicarage, the "subconscious eroticism" had not entirely subsided. Tea was spread beneath the sycamore tree and Mrs. Goolan was undecided which was the major worry, the meal or the engagement. Tiny was still asking everybody to look at her ring, and Prue was following her movements with worshipful eyes. Elaine and Clym were arranging the chairs and Bill was talking in adult tones to his father and Doctor Crouch.

Pip was the least moved by the news. He was testing the resiliency of his spinal column in an effort to worry something that worried him.

As Chris and Babe began to cross the lawn, all heads were turned to look at them.

"Look thoroughly bored, Babe," muttered Chris.

She looked thoroughly bored.

"And, Babe—don't forget we've got to keep our end up. They'll all start looking reproachful because we're not engaged too. Old people can't bear to see young people free—they are all matrimonomaniacs."

She nodded, and sighed. The nod expressed loyalty to Chris; the sigh, pity for herself.

Dr. Crouch struggled in vain to get the conversation round to Chris's career. Chris had Clym as an ally, and Babe so bothered the doctor with plates of cake and sandwiches, that he lost heart and ate in silence.

"But he'll start again at dinner," whispered Chris to Babe, as they walked back to change for tennis.

Within ten minutes they were back again, the girls in white jumpers and white serge skirts, the boys in white flannels.

The game started, Chris and Babe against Tiny and Bill. It was a very noisy game, and not very scientific, but it was pleasant to watch from the shade of the sycamore, with the sun shining upon the four young figures, in high relief against the old green lawn.

"Love—forty!" called Tiny. "Oh, I do love forty!"

"And I love twenty!" called Chris, and kissed Babe, just as she was going to serve.

Dr. Crouch smiled grimly.

"I suppose it's all right, Goolan, but upon my soul, the present generation stagger me."

"Kissing at tennis, do you mean, Crouch? I kissed at tennis—several times."

"No, no—there's no harm in kissing at tennis, but it's the general way they go on. Look at the novels they read—ought to be burnt—all sex and no sense!"

Mr. Goolan smiled.

"It's fashionable just now—sex. When I was about their age it was science and socialism—all the best young people were scientific or socialistic—and now science is almost as unfashionable as religion, and socialism is 'tripe'—at least, so Babe tells me—good 'tripe' in its day, but unfashionable. The new 'tripe' is sex. They believe in sex now instead of in science and socialism, and they read about it voraciously, and talk about it courageously, and

remain quite nice, clean young people, just the same as, when they were socialists, they remained egotists, and when they were scientific they remained sentimental."

"Humph!—Is that the doctrine of Original Sin?"

"Oh, no—the doctrine of original seemliness and sanity. As long as they believe in something—they are all right. There is only one sin, Crouch, and that is indifference; and there is only one sinner, and he is the Laodicean."

Dr. Crouch became silent. He liked Mr. Goolan, but he found him rather heterodox. He decided to wait till dinner-time, and then tackle Chris again.

And he did. But not till the food had vanished, by which time Chris had had two glasses of champagne and one of port. Clym had supplied the champagne. Bill's was the first engagement in the family, he had said, and should be celebrated in a seemly fashion.

Prue and David had been given permission to leave the table. Clym glanced at David.

"Dave—if you touch that car—I'll stun you with my new arm!"

David retired in contemptuous silence.

"Have you a new arm, Clym dear?" enquired Mrs. Goolan, worriedly.

"Yes—Briggs is bringing it down by the six o'clock."

"Briggs?—my dear Clym—where ever will you sleep him?"

"In the Austin!"

Elaine smiled.

"Dave will have taken it to pieces before that time. He sank the punt last week."

"Was he in it at the time?"

"Oh, no!"

"Pity!" said Clym, and refilled his glass.

Mrs. Goolan sighed.

"It's all right now, dear. He said it leaked and needed swelling."

Doctor Crouch coughed warningly. Chris pressed Babe's leg. He wanted to attract her attention and could think of no pleasanter way of doing so. She leant towards him, the small ears agog.

"Stand by—darling," he whispered, "Crouch is about to spring."

Dr. Crouch coughed again.

"Well, Chris, when are you going to get a job?" he said, briskly.

Chris looked up.

"When winter comes."

Being outside the circle of the initiated, Dr. Crouch took the words literally.

"Why wait till the winter?"

"I don't know—except that there's something about the English winter that makes work seem almost attractive."

Clym smiled inwardly. He scented a duel between old and young, and since he stood between the two, he relished the encounter as a disinterested onlooker. Surreptitiously, he refilled Chris's glass. The boy needed a stimulant; the odds were heavily against him.

Dr. Crouch was momentarily nonplussed, so Clym came to the rescue.

"Work is the Englishman's principal pleasure," he said.

Chris laughed excitedly.

"Of course it is; and, naturally, as it is a pleasure, we pretend it's a virtue. English people are like that—they can never enjoy anything without pretending that it's good for them. Pleasure for pleasure's sake offends their moral sense. The theatre educates us, golf exercises us, literature uplifts us, and work ennobles us."

"You put work among our pleasures then, do you?" murmured Mr. Goolan.

"Of course—it's our only real pleasure; our climate's too bad for us to enjoy any other. We so seldom feel really warm that we have to get hot, hurrying and scrambling and keeping close together. And then, having got warm, we feel happy, and because we're happy—we feel sinful, so we say that the cause of our happiness is good for us. Our climate is responsible for our worship of hard work. Fog and cold kill a love of colour and scent, and make gracious leisure impossible. They give us an appetite for beer and whisky instead of a taste for wine, and make us put comfort before beauty, and a good drainage system before good architecture. And the absence of sun and warmth and light make us shrivelled and bilious, and shrivelled and bilious people are always moral. Morality is little else but a condemnation of pleasure we are too shrivelled or too bilious to enjoy. Old Buckle was right when he explained national characteristics by climate. There was something in the clear air of the *Ægean* and *Ionian* seas that gave the Greeks their clear, untroubled minds. Here in this country we are for eight months wrapped in gloom, and for the other four we are afraid to unwrap ourselves in case we looked naked and beautiful, instead of shrivelled and bilious. English morality begins with a cold in the head and reaches its zenith with a chill on the liver. Look at the faces of our politicians, our industrialists and our judges—any one of them is enough to send the sun in if it did come out. And they don't want it to come out; because if the fog cleared, we should see them for what they really are—chimeras, who have boomed morality and duty at us through a fog-horn."

Clym glanced cautiously at the boy. The cheeks were flushed and the eyes sparkling. The wine had loosened his tongue, he mused, but the tongue had something to say.

The effect of Chris's outburst upon the others was very noticeable. Mr. Goolan had leant forward and was listening; Bill and Tiny looked surprised and uneasy, Elaine thoughtful, and Babe maliciously happy. Dr. Crouch frowned heavily, not with displeasure, but with puzzlement.

Mr. Goolan coughed.

"You would like to have been an Athenian, eh Chris?"

Chris turned his head eagerly.

"Yes, sir! I'd have loved the gymnasia and the baths, and the rhetoricians with brains too subtle to bother with facts; and the drama in the open-air theatre beneath a brilliant sun, tempered by a breeze from the snows of Olympus; and the temples and the human gods with their human tastes and weaknesses; and the games, the wrestling and discus throwing, and the running of youths, naked, before the eyes of an audience that had not learned to be ashamed of the most beautiful shape life has yet produced. It was worth dying at Thermopylæ and Marathon for that—and all we died for at Passchendaele and the Somme was ledgers and dividends, and coal and smoke and iron."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Clym, and filled Chris's glass again.

"The Greeks were a commercial nation, too, Chris," said Mr. Goolan.

"Not between Thermopylæ and Marathon—only later, and then commerce killed them, as it kills every nation that allows it to become its master instead of its servant. Commerce corrupts everything. It makes us prefer quantity to quality, money to value, and the things of the body to the things of the mind."

Dr. Crouch exploded.

"What the deuce have the Greeks got to do with your getting a job?"

"Well—if we were all Greeks here this evening, you

wouldn't expect me to get a job—you'd be expecting me to take off all my clothes and throw the discus on the lawn."

"If you have another glass of wine, I should think you probably will," said Bill.

"Chris dear!" said Mrs. Goolan in a worried voice.

Chris glanced up the table at her and smiled.

"Oh! But you would not be allowed to see me, Mrs. Goolan. In Greece, you would have been teaching Elaine and Babe to spin and weave. Greece was a man's civilization, and it produced men who grew wise without growing old."

Elaine saw a faint flush come up in Babe's cheeks.

"What about Socrates?" interpolated Bill unsteadily. He was legal, and he was not quite sure about Socrates.

"They gave him hemlock," said Chris. "The sanest thing they ever did. He was corrupting youth with good advice."

Bill looked nettled.

"The Greeks treated their women rottenly."

Chris laughed.

"They treated them as women and not as we do to-day—as a species of superior male."

Tiny thrust her pretty little chin into the conflict.

"I think modern women are wonderful!"

"They're not!" retorted Chris. "They're only wonderfully advertised and flattered by a press astute enough to realize that they've got all the real power in this epicene civilization of ours."

Elaine smiled.

"Tell us where we're wrong, Chris."

"You're not wrong—it's men who are wrong. They've got no spirit left, and the summit of their ambition is to become a woman's husband. They've just accepted meekly a system that makes them walk into the first office door that's

open, and sit inside on a stool from nine to five daily for the rest of their lives, supporting a wife and children."

"Women have to stay in a house all day, working," retorted Tiny.

"I know that, they're as much the victims as men. And all of them, men and women alike, are the victims of a civilization that resolutely excludes the young from everything except the drudgery of life."

Bill shook his head.

"You've got to do the drudgery first, to get experience."

"And when you've got it—what use is it to you? We're given everything when we're too old to enjoy it. If I get a job to-morrow and work hard, it'll probably be ten years before Babe and I could marry."

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Crouch. "Thousands of young couples marry at twenty-five."

"Yes, and to do it they have to give up everything except each other, and that's not life—that's not a fair test to put anyone to. Life's not just work and housekeeping—there must be a margin or we become dispirited slaves of routine. And there's no margin in commercial civilization. Salaries are graded so that every fellow has always just a little less than he can live on—not live literally, but live in the best sense, with something over from keeping the body to spend on the mind and the senses. When a couple become engaged, they begin to pay for it. They start saving for when they marry; and when they marry, they start saving for children; and when they've got children, they start saving for their education. And when they've saved, and reared and educated their children, the children go and they are left alone, with a little money for pleasure and no taste left for anything. It is when we are young we want pleasure—we have the blood and the life and the spirit to enjoy things; but all our lives they are held back from us,

till we become old and dyspeptic and narrow and stereotyped; and then we turn on the young, and because we've missed all that life has to offer, ourselves, we set to work to steer them into the same grooves, lest they should know the pleasures we missed."

Dr. Crouch growled.

"Life is a responsibility. It was given us to do something with."

Chris threw up his head.

"Life was not given to me—it was thrust on me. I did not ask to be born. But now I'm here—it is my life and no one else's, and I must live it my own way. And that we're never allowed to do. We have to live by example—to live our lives by other people's experience—and I can't and I won't—my life is the personal experience of Christopher Barrymore, and only Christopher Barrymore can experience it."

There was an awkward pause. The shadow of the late Reverend J. Barrymore had crept into the room and stood somewhere, goading his son into revolt.

Even Clym was silent. He was beginning to see Chris from a new angle.

"I'm not quite sure that you're right, Chris," said Mr. Goolan gently. "Did you not say that the things of the body are not as important as the things of the mind? If that is true, then it is not our surroundings that matter, but ourselves."

"Yes—but ourselves can develop or remain cramped and stagnant. And narrow circumstances warp us, bottle us up, make us thwarted, repressed, irritable, and frayed. Wasn't it Plato who spoke of the ideal education of Youth? He was to be surrounded with beauty at his most receptive age, so that later, when he met with ugliness, he should recognize it and not mistake it for beauty. We to-day are never allowed

to enjoy the receptive age, never allowed to remain young long enough to steep ourselves in beauty. We're old before we're forty, because we're not allowed to remain young after we're twenty. We're taken by the hand and guided by the serious into one or other of the well-loved, well-known ruts they've trodden themselves. Our ideas are laughed or frowned at, our love of life is called idleness or depravity, our energy is irresponsibility, our enthusiasm is inexperience. And then, as we begin to lose them all, we are told we are becoming wiser, and are given a little of what we wanted most when it was denied us. Finally, somewhere about forty, we're the finished product, identical replicas of those who trained us. All that we were ourselves is gone. I would like to see a whole generation removed at birth from their country, their parents, their schools and their wise men. It would release such a fund of energy and *joie de vivre* that the old world would rock and dissolve, and on its ruins we'd build a big zoo, and fill it with statesmen and generals and moral philosophers, and captains of industry, and schoolmasters, and historians, and scientists, and censors, and we'd dance round the cages, all of us, youths and maidens, led by some Pied Piper like Clym, who'd lead us round and round until the caged ones had seen what life really could be with us; and then he'd lead us off into the bowels of a mountain, that they might realize what life would be without us."

There was silence, and Chris suddenly became self-conscious and blushed like a girl.

Mr. Goolan smiled.

"We know what life would be without you all, Chris," he said, "but be kind to us and remember that the young can always grow old, but the old can never grow young again."

Chris stammered.

"I—I'm afraid I've been most frightfully rude to you and to Dr. Crouch. I . . . I was only theorising . . . and I wasn't hitting at either of you—I mean, you're different, but I—I got worked up—and I've had five glasses of wine——"

"It was worth it," said Mr. Goolan, and turned to Dr. Crouch. "Come along, Crouch—we'd better go, before they put us in a cage and dance round us." He turned to Mrs. Goolan: "Come along, my dear."

They went.

There was a pause, and Clym reached for the decanter.

"Chris, let me fill your glass."

Bill intervened.

"I should say you've had enough, Chris——"

"And I say he hasn't!" said Babe. "Fill up, Clym, and mine too."

Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"It was very entertaining, but where's it lead? If you and Babe ever want to marry, you'll have to do something more solid than talk, Chris."

Babe leant across the table aggressively.

"While we're on the subject, Bill, I may as well tell you that we're fed up with this everlasting talk about getting jobs, and settling down, and getting married. Anyone would think you'd solved all the problems of the universe just because you're engaged."

"Hear, hear!" said Chris.

"I don't know about the problems of the universe," retorted Bill, "but we're beginning to settle our own, and that's more than you and Chris are doing."

She flushed.

"And that's nothing very wonderful. Everything's been made easy for you—you've had a decent education, and a job in Uncle's office waiting for you."

"Waiting for me! I had to pass stiff exams!"

"Stiff exams! Anyone can pass a legal exam. It's only a question of swotting—it needs no imagination."

Bill sat forward.

"Imagination!—I should think you want plenty in your line. All you do is slosh paint on to a canvas and call the result a picture—imagination does the rest!"

"And what do lawyers do," broke in Chris, "except rob everyone? There are millions of lawyers in the world, and there are not a dozen artists."

"And a jolly good job too!" interrupted Tiny. "You know where you are with lawyers, but artists are . . . well, they're always in a muddle over everything."

Clym raised his eyebrows.

"Elaine," he said suddenly, "why on earth have you started to dye your hair?"

Elaine opened her eyes and mouth wide.

"Clym!—I've never done such a thing in my life."

"Rubbish!—It's perfectly obvious."

Tiny exploded.

"Clym—you're a beast. Elaine's got the loveliest hair of any woman I've ever seen."

"It's dyed," said Clym stubbornly.

"Rot!" interposed Chris.

"I think it's caddish, Clym," said Babe. "You know perfectly well that Elaine's hair has always been that colour."

"You must be tight, Clym," said Bill.

"But what ever makes you think it, Clym?" said Elaine, worriedly.

"I don't," replied Clym, "but I thought as the others were all quarrelling, we'd better do the same."

They all burst out laughing, and Tiny blew him a kiss.

"Oh, Clym, you are a darling!"

"Thanks very much," said Clym, and stood up.

"Well, I must go down to the Anchor," he added. "I'm meeting Briggs there."

Chris jumped up.

"Oh, can I come too, Clym?"

Clym raised his eyebrows and very cautiously inclined his head towards Babe, who was staring out of the window. Chris saw the hint, but did not interpret it correctly.

"You don't mind if I go, do you, Babe? I'll only be about half an hour, and we've all to-morrow."

She turned her head slowly. The dark eyes were thoughtful.

"No, I don't mind," she said.

"Good! Come on, Clym."

They went.

As they disappeared through the french window, Bill laughed brusquely.

"Well, you are a mutt, Babe!—You let him do just as he likes."

She swung round at him, flaming.

"You mind your own business. I'm sick of criticism. Chris and I understand each other—even—even if were not engaged."

The door slammed behind her.

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Bill.

Elaine sighed.

"You deserve to be, Bill," she said, and left them.

Walking into the drawing-room, she glanced out on to the lawn. Babe was walking slowly down the slope to the low brick wall that divided the garden from the green hill.

For an instant Elaine hesitated, then passed through the french windows and followed her sister. It was a delicate task she had set herself, and she knew it.

Babe had come to a standstill now and was leaning with

her arms upon the ivy-covered stone. Hearing Elaine's footstep, she looked round sharply and resentfully.

"Got a cigarette?" said Elaine.

Babe hesitated, but in the end she took her case from the pocket of her woollen jacket.

"Aren't you going to have one too?" said Elaine.

Babe nodded and they both leaned upon the wall, smoking.

It was very quiet, and the rooks were coming home, trailing out across the paling sky. In the valley below, the hanger threw a soft shadow across the river. The ripple of the water sounded very clear and sweet and cool.

Against the eastern sky, the line of the hill shone yellow, for the corn had been cut and the stubble caught the sunlight. In long converging lines, the shocks stood like small golden tents, each with its own long tapering shadow. Paler than a mermaid's face, the full moon showed faint in outline, poised on the crest of the hill.

And then the stillness was broken by the sound of voices, clear in tone but too distant for the words to be audible.

Babe glanced down towards the river. Clym and Chris were walking along the narrow path beside the water. Against the green of the grass, both figures stood out boldly, but it was only one she watched. He looked rather small beside Clym. The white flannels showed up vividly against the green background of beech trees. He was wearing no hat and the light shone upon his hair.

He was laughing—she could just hear it, a soft, elusive sound, infinitely remote.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Elaine—do I—am I silly where Chris is concerned?"

"Do you think you are, yourself?"

There was a pause.

"No—I don't."

"Well then, why bother what other people think?"

Babe smiled softly, her eyes on the slim figure in the sunlit valley below.

"I do love him so dreadfully—that—at times, I . . . I'm afraid I do spoil him."

At that moment, Bill and Tiny appeared.

"Come on, Babe," said Tiny. "We're going to get the punt ready. We'll all sleep out to-night—it's so marvellously hot."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BY the time Clym and Chris reached the Anchor, it was eight o'clock. Briggs was already seated in the public bar.

"Send him in a pint, Bantrim," said Clym.

"Just a minute, Bantrim," said Chris. "Charge the pint to me."

Clym shook his head.

"No good, Chris—Briggs won't drink with civilians—a little prejudice I can't wean him of. Charge it to me, Bantrim, and er—what about ours, Chris—what do you recommend?"

"The Three Diamond Old Ale."

Mr. Bantrim waited alertly for Clym's approval. But Clym shook his head.

"After your conversation, we can't drink anything old, Chris, we must drink something young."

Chris grinned sheepishly.

"Younger's Scotch Ale, sir?" queried Bantrim, helpfully.

"Precisely, Bantrim," said Clym.

Bantrim vanished.

"I say, Clym—let me pay for these, at any rate. This is the first time I've ever been out with you alone."

Clym bowed.

"All right, Peter Pan," he said, and passed him a cigarette.

They had the room to themselves. The window was

open, and across the river the sun burned in a crimson crescent upon the line of the swarthy hills.

Bantrim hurried in with a tray, and lit the brass lamp. Then, with the heavy satisfied breathing of a good conscience, he bustled out again. Chris was in paradise. For the first time, Clym had accepted him alone and on equality. Each of them had a tankard, each a cigarette. The room was snug. It was man's domain and he had entered it at last.

And having entered it, he felt he must justify his entry. He began to talk. Clym listened, his head lolling back on the cushion, his cigarette holder pointing to the ceiling. He was interested, less by what the boy said than by his way of saying it. It was his artlessness that was so attractive.

"Do you think I'll ever write, Clym?"

The question penetrated his thoughts and brought him back to earth again. For a moment, he did not answer.

"You've read a good deal in the last few months, haven't you?" he said.

"Well, yes, I have. You remember the first thing of mine you read?—you said—well, you put it nicely, but I knew what you meant. I didn't know enough to be able to write. So I've read—read like the devil."

"Humph! When have you done it? By the joint report of Tiny and Babe—they've never seen you reading."

Chris laughed.

"I've done all my reading in St. James's Park—when I was busy selling Complete Editions and Multiflux Vacuum Cleaners."

Clym smiled.

"I see—but don't read too much, or you'll be growing old." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Time," he added. "It's now nine-thirty, and you told Babe you wouldn't be long."

"Oh, but we've got all day to-morrow."

Clym shrugged his shoulders and sat back again. Chris went on talking. At nine forty-five, Clym interrupted him.

"Has Babe ever introduced you to Pender?"

Chris frowned.

"That artist fellow with long hair and fingers like a woman?"

"Yes."

"Oh, yes, I met him once—I couldn't stand him."

"We were not impressed—except Father. Father liked him."

He appeared not to be looking at Chris, but he was quick to see a shade of anxiety in the blue eyes.

"Did—er—did he visit you, then?"

"Oh, yes," said Clym airily, "he wanted to be engaged to Babe."

Chris sat up.

"What!—oh, damn it all, Clym—Pender's impossible!" He paused and added: "She didn't care for him, did she?"

"We were never quite sure. He's a damn clever artist and she's no fool at her work. They had a lot in common, and of course the fellow's got tons of money. He wanted to take her on a tour of the art galleries of Europe—with one or two others, of course—but he offered to pay her exes."

"What damn cheek!"

"Oh no—I don't think so—not among really modern young people."

There was a pause. Chris was staring resentfully at his tankard. Clym was examining the ceiling.

"Clym—er—why didn't . . . why didn't she go?"

"Father was against it."

"Oh!"

Again there was a pause.

"Otherwise, she'd have gone, I suppose?"

"I suppose so."

Again there was a pause.

"She's never told me a word about this."

Clym lit another cigarette.

"Well—there's no real reason why she should, is there? It isn't as though you are engaged."

"Oh, no—quite," said Chris hurriedly, and glanced out of the window.

The sun had vanished, but behind the black hill a great fan of orange and crimson spread upward to the first faint stars. The owls were hooting from the shrouded hanger.

He stood up.

"Well!" he said, with exaggerated cheerfulness, "I suppose I'd better get along."

"Won't you have one more 'Younger'?" murmured Clym. The dark eyes were almost hidden by the eyelids.

"Er—not just now—thanks, Clym."

He drank off the remainder of his ale, smoothed down his coat and nodded casually.

"So long!"

"So long!" said Clym, his eyes still hidden. But as the door closed, they opened, and the impassive mouth parted in a smile.

"*O sancta simplicitas!*"

He stood up.

"Bantrim!—summon Briggs."

Briggs entered.

"What is it, Briggs?"

"Same as you, sir."

"Two pints, Bantrim, at intervals, till further orders.—Briggs, I want reassuring—what did you think of the War?"

"If I may say so, sir, it was a bloody good war, sir."

"Certainly bloody—good in parts."

Bantrim appeared with the tray.

As the door closed Clym raised his tankard.

"Briggs—we will now assume that it is August 1914."

Briggs bowed respectfully.

"I wish to Gawd it was, sir!"

"For some things," said Clym, and plunged his face into the froth.

Beneath the beech trees of the hanger, night had come—night softened by the faint effulgence of the climbing moon. Chris hurried, his footsteps hardly audible on the thick carpet of moss and dead leaves. Here and there a gap in the leafy canopy let through a slender beam of elfish light that threw patterns of the leaves upon his face, and a faint, dancing shadow of his slim figure upon the smooth boles. The hidden river lapped the fretted banks with little sleepy gurglings. The air was warm, sweet-scented, and heavy with the drowse of the declining year.

Through the trees came the sleepy strokes of St. Cyprian's. Chris counted them as he hurried. Ten—and he had told her he would not be long.

He left the woods and was in moonlight, at the foot of the hill crowned by St. Cyprian's. He could see the black outline of the church, with its long slender spire, half silver, half jet, topped with a silver vane.

"Is that you, Chris?"

It was Elaine's voice. She had approached him round the flank of the hill and had been in shadow until that moment.

Chris greeted her eagerly.

"Oh, I'm glad it's you, Elaine—where's Babe?"

"She's gone to bed."

He glanced at her, but he could not read her face, for she stood with her back to the moon.

"Why's she gone to bed so early?"

"I'll walk back with you, Chris." She took his arm. She always took his arm, even when Babe was present. She

had done so first on his own challenge, and now it had become a habit.

"You are a little beast, you know, Chris."

"I believe I am—I don't mean to be—but I believe I am." He paused. "Is she very cross with me?"

"She'd never tell anyone if she were. To-night she didn't say anything—only—well, of course, it was obvious. They had all planned to spend the night in the punt, thinking you'd be back within half an hour. They'd got everything ready and were all so excited about it, and then you didn't come, and she said she felt rather tired so she thought she'd rather sleep indoors."

They had reached the gate to the churchyard now, and passed through. Chris came to a standstill, leaning with his back against the wall. The moon shone full on his face. Elaine remained in shadow.

"I've no excuse," he said slowly, "Clym reminded me, and I didn't want to go—not then."

"Oh, it's not that, you silly boy—she's got more sense than to be hurt because the first time you go out with Clym you're late back."

"Well—what else have I done?"

"Have you forgotten all you said at dinner—about marriage and women?"

"Oh, but, Elaine—that was only just talk—and besides, she took it all right—she was on my side."

Elaine laughed softly.

"You radiant little ass, Chris! Haven't you yet realized that she would always be on your side, when there were sides to take?"

There was a long pause. Chris was staring at the moon.

"Do you think she's asleep, Elaine?" he said suddenly.

"She might not be," murmured Elaine.

"Good—er—excuse me, won't you?"

He was gone, a slim figure in white flannels, running bareheaded in the moonlight among the mouldering tombstones. She watched him till he vanished in the shadow of the vicarage wall. Then, with a faint sigh, she turned and walked slowly down to the river again.

As Chris passed through the door into the garden, he took an anxious glance at the house. Not a light showed and each window gave back the cold sheen of the moon.

He hurried across the lawn and on to the veranda. The french windows were closed.

They had all gone to bed. He knew the habits of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Goolan always retired early. The front door was left open for late-comers. He crept round the veranda and entered the hall. The house was as still as the churchyard. He switched on the light. Tiny's and Babe's hats were side by side on the hatstand. By the stairs were a pile of blankets and packages, a canvas bucket and a primus stove. Cancelled happiness.

He tiptoed upstairs and into his room. He couldn't tap on her door now. He felt too ashamed of himself. Without switching on the light, he lay down on the bed and began smoking. The room was in faint moonshine. How long he lay there he did not know. But a long while after he had come in he heard Elaine return and go to her bedroom. Clym he knew no one would hear. He would stay in Bantrim's parlour long after the Anchor bar was closed.

It was a very hot night, and after a while he walked to the window and looked out. Brighter than the moonshine, a square of yellow light fell upon the lane beneath.

Tiny must be reading in bed, he thought, and then he suddenly remembered that Tiny had not been given her old bedroom this time. She had asked for the one next to Bill's, so that they could say "good night" out of their windows.

It was Babe who was reading then, he said to himself, and slowly his lips parted in a smile.

Swinging his legs out of the window, he felt for the rainwater pipe and slid silently to the ground. On tiptoe, he crept along until he stood beneath the lighted window. It was open. Seizing the ivy, he began to climb, regardless of the damage done to the white flannels. His forehead brushed the sill, his eyes cautiously peeped over, and then he hung, motionless.

Babe lay on the bed, reading. Her feet were together, her head raised, chin in her hands. Between her elbows lay the book. Upon a chair were her clothes. Upon the end of the bed her nightdress was spread, ready for when she needed it. It was a very hot night.

Chris closed his eyes. His head was swimming and a loud pounding was in his ears. So for an instant he hung motionless, then, lowering his head, he groped his way down to earth again.

He leant back against the wall, his eyes still closed. He was trembling violently. After a while, he crept away down the lane, to a stile overlooking the valley.

The hanger was a black wall, the fields were silver, the river was a little tremulous vein. Above all was the sky, a vast pallid dome, pierced with pinpoints of twinkling light.

And wherever his eyes looked, material things vanished. Against the dark bulk of the hanger he could see that intangible whiteness, lissom and defenceless. Among the pallid stars she lay, chin in hands, head bent. Upon the cold silver of the meadows she was stretched, feet pointed to the river, head raised above the tufted grasses. All earth and sky were not big enough to hold the infinite repetitions of that lissom and defenceless shape.

He realized suddenly that there were tears in his eyes, and hid his face in his hands. He had not expected that it

would be like that. He had always imagined that he would want to hold and kiss and strain and hurt, and he did not want to do one of those things. He wanted to cry—cry for pity of the sheer lovely defencelessness of her. He raised his head from his hands and stared down into the moonlit valley.

Across his mind there flitted the memory of his school-days; of photos passed furtively from hand to hand. It was a vile blasphemy against her, against youth, against all that was sweet and wholesome, and lovely and mysterious; against the very stars themselves, where she lay, feet together, brushing the star-dust of the Milky Way, and little face peeping downward at the Great Bear.

He drew himself up and walked back. He must never tell her. He could never make her believe what he had felt that night. She would never understand that he could see her like that and love and pity her, and never want to touch her, unless it were just to kiss her once in gratitude for being what she was—young, lovely, and his very own. He was beneath the window now, and hesitated. He must just speak to her, just tell her he was sorry he had forgotten her such a little while ago.

“Babe!” he called softly.

There was a faint rustle.

“Babe!” he called again.

There were furtive sounds, a shadow upon the ground, and she was looking out into the night. He could just see her head and neck, and the folds of the flowered kimono he knew so well in Butler’s Mews.

“Is that you, Chris?”

“Yes—and, Babe—may I—may I just come up and . . . kiss you good night?”

There was a pause.

“I don’t think I ought to kiss you, Chris.”

"I know you oughtn't . . . only . . . oh, Babe, do!"

There was a very faint sigh.

"Wait till I'm back in bed, then."

He waited. Then a soft voice said:

"I'm ready."

He climbed up the ivy, swung his leg over the sill, and jumped down on the floor.

She sat up, with the coverlet drawn round her waist, her knees raising the bedclothes like a little white pyramid. Arms and shoulders were bare, and two little pink straps lay across the warm flesh.

She was smiling, but Chris did not realize it. He was by the bedside, and held her to him, his cheek pressed against hers, the fair hair mingling with the black.

"Babe . . . don't move . . . just stay there . . . I want to know you're there."

She raised her hands gently and touched his cheek.

"What's the matter, Chris darling?"

"Nothing . . . I'm just marvellously happy."

She sighed, and gently moved her face so that her cheek rubbed softly against his.

"Chris—darling . . . what has happened?"

"I don't know."

"But, Chris darling . . . you . . . oh, you are so sweet and . . . so gentle . . . why is it, Chris . . . when . . . when I'm like this, in my nightie . . . and I . . . can feel you against my breasts?"

He drew back suddenly and lifted her face.

"Because, Babe . . . oh, I don't know why it is . . . but it is." And bending, he kissed her lips.

There came a knock at the door, and they drew apart.

"Who's there?"

"Me!" whispered Tiny.

Chris laughed a little unsteadily, and opened the door.

Outside was Tiny in her dressing gown, and just behind her was Bill, in his. Babe clasped her hands.

"Oh, good!—we're all united again."

They came into the room and closed the door.

"Chris," said Tiny, "aren't you thoroughly ashamed of yourself?"

"Absolutely contrite, humble, and abashed."

Babe began to jig up and down, making the bed springs squeak.

"He's marvellous—your Chris—Tiny!"

"My Chris?"

"No, *my* Chris." She stretched out her arms.

"What's the time?" said Bill.

"Half-past eleven," murmured Chris, from the back of Babe's neck.

"Well—just to show that the engagement's not bust up the party—what about putting some things on, and camping, after all?"

Tiny's blue eyes rose to heaven.

"Bill darling—you get more absolutely marvellous every day!"

Half an hour later, four figures crossed the moonlit lawn, laughing and talking softly. Through the churchyard they stole, among the glimmering tombstones; with blankets and food and love and life.

And later, beneath the shadow of the hanger, the punt lay moored, with cover lowered. And within, the candles winked and spluttered and the primus roared, and the smell of hot coffee drifted out into the warmth of the summer night.

And St. Cyprian's struck twelve, and the owls hooted, and the light of the candles flickered and went out. And in the darkness were soft sighs and murmurs, and without were little gurglings and lappings of the water against the old punt's sides.

"Will you tell me, one day, Chris darling—what made you so . . . so . . . marvellously sweet and gentle to-night?"

"One day, darling—when we're married."

"Shurrup!" murmured Tiny, "I'm sleepy."

And soft breathing became audible, and St. Cyprian's struck the half-hour.

And then, somewhere a long way off, there came the sound of voices singing, faint and rhythmic as to the beat of marching feet. Nearer it came and nearer, but within the punt all slept, unknowing. And the singing voices grew louder, and the words took shape and meaning:

*"It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go.
It's a long way to Tipperary,
To the sweetest girl I know.
Goodbye, Piccadilly—farewell, Leicester Square.
It's a long, long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there!"*

Nearer it came, but no one heard, save the owls in the wooded hanger, and in the moonlight two figures approached, marching side by side and singing in unison:

*"It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go."*

They passed, and the words grew fainter and the singing voices more soft, until the hill above the church caught the echo and sent it back again

*"It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go."*

The words floated down to the river, grew fainter, and died away. Within the punt was gentle breathing. The phantom army had passed, unheeded.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT was Bill who finally got Chris "a real job with a salary." The firm of Goolan, Goolan & Snaith had a big city connection, and Bill's uncle "spoke" for Chris with the junior partner of Messrs. Batten & Trench, Merchants, of 101 Unity Square, E.C.

As Chris had no experience, the salary was small: as he was a nominee of Joseph Goolan, of Goolan, Goolan & Snaith, it was bigger than that normally paid to junior clerks, with or without experience. It was, in fact, one hundred pounds per annum.

The event took place towards the end of October, and just saved the twins from disruption. For two months Chris had not earned a penny, the bank balance was down to £35 3s. 4d., and Tiny was mutinous. She had threatened to give up cooking and newspaper competitions and go in for film acting.

The state of affairs had not been due to lack of endeavour on Christopher's part. He had answered every advertisement that suited his age and experience—had even tried walking into offices and asking to see the managers, in the hope that his fitness for any sort of work that required no experience might be more apparent if he appeared in the flesh than if he just said by letter what an efficient, honest, intelligent fellow he was. But it was not. When he did succeed in getting to a manager, which was rare, he was received kindly, almost gently, and sent away with a sort of unvoiced suggestion that if he liked to apply again when he

was seventeen, there might be an opening. Bitterly he had inveighed against his chin that refused to grow any hair, and his head that persisted in growing Tiny's variety. Once he had attached a false moustache, but it had not been a success. In the middle of an interview, he had twirled it too realistically and it had come off in his hand.

So when the real offer came he jumped at it. He was interviewed by the junior partner of Messrs. Batten & Trench. Both Batten and Trench were dead years ago, and in their places were Mr. John Renwick MacFadyen and his brother, Mr. James Renwick MacFadyen—the former the senior, the latter the junior partner. The interview was brief and successful. Chris took a liking to Mr. James Renwick MacFadyen. He was rather a senior junior partner, Chris thought, but he forgave him for that as he was offering him a job, and, which was more important, a salary.

Actually, James Renwick MacFadyen was only fifty, but the fact was not believable until he smiled. At all other times he looked a rather grim, grey-haired, hard-headed business man—which, in fact, he was. When he smiled, he lost the grimness. It was all he did lose. He still retained the grey hair and the hard head.

The interview concluded encouragingly.

"I don't worry much about experience, Barrymore," said Mr. James Renwick MacFadyen, "it's aptitude that really counts in business. Our Manager, Mr. Skillan, had no experience when he came to us—and he was your age then—but he had aptitude, and within ten years he became our Manager. Aptitude—that's all that matters."

"Yes, sir," said Chris, thirstily.

The junior partner bowed.

"Report to Mr. Turnbull at nine o'clock on Monday next, then, Barrymore. Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," said Chris, parchedly.

He groped his way down three flights of stairs and emerged into the chastened sunlight of an autumn day. He hoped everything was all right, but the word "aptitude" worried him. And ten years seemed a devil of a long while before you became a manager. The sort of job he really wanted was one where they made you manager before you started.

The appointment was celebrated that night. The four had dinner at the Green Grasshopper. Chris was in the chair. They went on to a show afterwards, and after that had supper somewhere in Soho. The whole evening only cost four pounds, and, as Chris said when Babe remonstrated with him:

"In a fortnight's time I shall have earned that!"

In less than that time, he had earned a reputation with the staff of Batten & Trench. For the first two days they had treated him with a mingling of respect, pity, and caution. It was known that he had a private income, and that earned him respect: it was known that he was a clergyman's son and an orphan, and that earned him pity: it was evident from his appearance that he was an innocent, gently-nurtured boy, and that induced caution.

No one swore in his presence, and the latest bawdy story was told out of earshot. He was given a ledger nearly as big as himself, and a stool nearly as tall, and left to the tuition of Mr. Clements, a blue-faced, bald-headed gentleman, who had taught all new juniors their work, and never learnt his own.

And then, one morning, Chris dropped the ledger. He nearly dropped it every morning. The Multiflux Vacuum Cleaner was a paperweight compared with that ledger. Chris would heave and grunt and strain till he got the top on the edge of the desk, and then he would push like a madman

till it slipped on. This morning, it slipped off. It fell on Chris's toe.

"***! and ***! and ***! the thing," said Chris.

Cautiously he turned his head. A line of horror-struck faces were looking at him.

"Ahem!" he added, apologetically.

And then, suddenly, the horror vanished, and a look of indescribable relief came over all the faces.

"We ought to have a bloody crane for that ledger," said somebody.

"A bloody hydraulic lift would be more suitable!" said someone else.

Thereafter, the only person who interfered with freedom of speech was Miss Joy, the typist, when she was not in the Manager's or the Partners' room.

There followed a noticeable increase in the friendliness of the staff towards Chris, an increase that multiplied two days later through another incident.

This time the principal protagonist was Ffolliott. Chris had noticed Ffolliott the first day he had entered the office. Since then, he had heard his history. Batten & Trench, Ltd., was the London office of Batten, Batten & Broadbent, of Manila, Iloilo and Cebu. The business was in hemp, copra, and sugar from the Philippines. Ffolliott had been to Manila. He had not stayed, but he had been, and anyone who had actually been to the Manila branch had a status in the London office that was unimpeachable. Ffolliott, moreover, had been to a Public School. Batten & Trench, Ltd., preferred the public school boy for their Philippine branches. The *esprit de corps* learned at the public school, ensured the right attitude towards the native. Ffolliott had shown the right attitude towards the native. It was the native women who had overtaxed his *esprit de corps*.

*

After twelve months, he had been sent home as "unsuited to a hot climate." He had been lucky to get a place in the London office, for Mr. John was a Presbyterian and a Liberal. Had he not also been shrewd, Ffolliott would have lost his job. But Mr. John knew that Ffolliott was efficient in his work, and efficient men were expensive. Being a good Liberal, Mr. John had read Lord Morley on Compromise. Ffolliott was allowed to keep his job, on a salary that just kept him.

He was a tall, good-looking man of about thirty-five years of age. He dressed well, lived well, and loved well. It would have taken more than a small salary to break down Ffolliott's *esprit de corps*.

He was known as "P. B. Ffolliott," though his initials were "G. K." "P. B." was a sobriquet bestowed by the staff. Ffolliott had only one term of disapproval. Everybody and everything he disliked, he called "perfectly bloody."

He was a bachelor, partly because he could not afford to marry; principally because he had never wanted to. It is true there were no native women in London, but as he would always say:

"In London, who needs native women?"

He had a fair knowledge of literature, a witty tongue, and the most exhaustive collection of bawdy stories of any man between the Royal Exchange and the Tower of London.

Only the uninitiated ever tried to tell Ffolliott a bawdy story. All who knew him, approached him deferentially with the words:

"I expect *you've* heard this one, Ffolliott."

Whereupon Ffolliott would wave a deprecating hand and answer:

"Possibly—but in case——"

He always had heard it, and would quote from his mine

of bawdy-lore an older or more subtle variant of the *conte*. On such occasions he would ape the language of an erudite mythologist discussing variants of myths collected from obscure tribes.

"The authorities are agreed," he would say, "that in the earliest example of that story the bridegroom was eighty and the bride eighteen. It makes no real difference, of course, but I think it is perhaps just a trifle more polished—shall we say, more euphonious? The alliteration of eighty and eighteen adds just that little something, eh?"

And then, one day, work almost stopped at Batten & Trench's. It was rumoured that someone had told Ffolliott a story he had never heard. Ffolliott confirmed the rumour.

"It's perfectly true," he said nonchalantly, "but I'll bet anyone five bob they can't guess who told me."

No one accepted the wager.

"Well," said Ffolliott, "it was our little clergyman's orphan, Barrymore!"

Thereafter, Chris's work was constantly being interrupted. A head would appear over his shoulder and a voice would whisper reverently:

"Have you heard this one, Barrymore?"

They were mostly Ffolliott's, but Ffolliott had no professional jealousy. Few men could tell a story as he could, and he knew it.

But he had respect for anyone who told him one that he had never heard, and that respect made him invite Chris to lunch the next day. Chris paid. When Ffolliott asked anyone out to lunch, anyone paid except Ffolliott. The invitation implied a wish for society, not for expense.

But inside the office he was an ally worth having. He was competent and clear-headed, and had the ear of Mr. James. No one knew why, but he had it and he used it. He enjoyed privileges that none of the rest of the staff

enjoyed—small privileges, but useful ones. He never took less than an hour and a half for his lunch. He never worked later than six o'clock. He seldom made a mistake in his work, but when he did he would discuss it with Mr. James as between two gentlemen, both of whom realized that of course mistakes would occur, even in a firm that was fortunate enough to have Mr. James as partner and Mr. Ffolliott as assistant accountant.

He had charming manners, good conversation, a fund of tact, and, above all, a capacity for simulating interest in others that never failed to make them interested in him. If he had had money, he would have made many acquaintances and no friends. Being poor, he made a few acquaintances and no enemies.

In Chris he took an interest as nearly genuine as he could take in anybody. He helped him with his work and protected him from his inexperience. It is true he frequently borrowed money from him, but he always repaid—a thing he did not frequently do with borrowed money.

He could not himself have said why he treated Chris as he did. He certainly liked him, but he liked many people without treating them well when his own welfare demanded that they should be treated badly. Actually, his bias in Chris's favour had deeper roots than he suspected. Chris was a link with the past; with the time of school holidays in a doctor's house in Devon, of youthful hopes and ambitions, of *esprit de corps* before it had petered out in the embraces of native women.

On Chris's side there was strong liking and some admiration. Had he never met Clym, the admiration might have been as strong as the liking.

The other clerks he got to know more slowly, and slowest of all he got to know Bolt.

Bolt was the only man in the office whom Ffolliott really

disliked. He said that it was because Bolt was a Socialist. Actually, it was something more fundamental than political antipathy. Economic circumstances had put Bolt and Ffolliott on terms of social equality, but the process in each case had been in a reverse direction. They had met on a plane to which one had risen and the other sunk.

Bolt was a lean, wiry fellow, sallow-faced, with a pair of big, dark, lambent eyes. He never wore a hat or an overcoat, and summer and winter he cycled his hundred miles on a Sunday, starting from and returning to Bethnal Green, after a day among the pines, beech, and gorse of Surrey and Sussex.

At first, Chris disliked him. It was mutual. To Bolt, Chris was a boy with a private income, keeping out of a job some boy who had no income at all. To Chris, Bolt was the unknown and the unpleasant. Vaguely he sensed in him a deep resentment against life, and just then Chris found life very pleasant. They seldom spoke, except about the work, but whenever they did Chris felt that in some way Bolt not only disliked, but despised him. It took the form

vague hints that in a better world Chris would have to work for his living, and as Chris was just then working harder than he had ever worked in his life before, he was not inclined to view with favour the advent of a better world.

And then, one day, Chris mentioned Okebourne to Bolt, and Bolt knew it—knew every inch of it—the river, the hanger, the churchyard, and the church.

"Go there five times every year on the bike," he said aggressively, as though Chris had tried to prevent him.

"When did you first go?" said Chris excitedly.

"About five years ago."

"Did you really? What a pity I didn't know you then. I could have taken you up in the belfry of the church—there's a marvellous view from there, right down the river

to Spelbourne. And I could have shown you a path through the hanger that only I and my sister knew of—in fact, we made it—it was trespassing, really. And I could have shown you—— ”

Bolt smiled derisively.

“ I don’t doubt you could, but would you? ”

Chris opened his blue eyes.

“ Why, of course—why ever not? ”

And then Bolt smiled again, not derisively. Thereafter, they often talked of Okebourne, and never of a better world.

Ffolliott mildly disapproved.

“ My dear boy—the fellow is a Socialist and he never wears a hat—to allow for the swelling of his head, presumably, or else to leave it clear for a crown of thorns.”

He and Bolt had not spoken for years, except on business. And the last occasion had been the first and last on which Bolt had ever sworn. Ffolliott had complained of an error in Bolt’s work, whereupon Bolt had flushed.

“ Of course, your work is bloody perfect? ” he had said.

To which Ffolliott had answered :

“ Of course ! And yours is perfectly bloody.”

The others clerks Chris soon knew. There was Clements, the little bald-headed man who taught all juniors their work and never knew his own. Clements was one out of two of the staff who had worked under the original Batten and Trench. He was a kindly, fuddled little man, who took snuff and anything else that was offered. He also took two hours for lunch and returned smelling of cloves. His work was principally ruling off accounts that were closed. It was thought that he could not make a mistake in ruling lines. But he could—after lunch. An attack of hiccoughs would shake the ruler and give the lines the appearance of a graph.

Then there was Gattle, a pale, thin man of about thirty ;

willing, kindly, and moderately inefficient. Gattle had been trying for years to produce a child. His efforts had been rewarded two years before Chris entered the firm. Everyone in the office knew about Gattle's baby. It was an unfortunate child. It had been born in Cæsarian section, thereby nearly killing its mother and leaving its father crushed by debt. Since its birth, it had taken every complaint that less greedy children prefer to spread over the first ten years of their lives. But Gattle never complained. Each time it recovered he took another photograph of it, which he would exhibit to the whole office. They reminded Chris of the illustrations in the pamphlets of Dr. Barnardo's Homes. Gattle's baby always looked like one that Dr. Barnardo's Homes had missed.

Then there was Ginn. The name was unfortunate, for Ginn only drank beer. He did a little work too, but generally speaking he only drank beer.

Chris liked Ginn. Everybody liked Ginn except his wife—and she loved him. It was his habits she did not like. Neither did Ginn, but he could not break himself of them. He was always contrite and self-reproachful.

"I drink too much, friend," he would mutter in Chris's ear when he came back from lunch. And as he always breathed heavily when he spoke, Chris agreed with him. So did beer, for Ginn was a rosy-faced, stout fellow, with an asthmatic laugh and a very dry wit. It was the only dry thing about Ginn, Ffolliott said.

He had a very hoarse voice and a very confidential manner, and he would have shared his last sixpence with anybody, if he had not already shared it between the publican and the Revenue.

The office boy was called Kemp. He was red-faced, and lazy, and had a set of whistle-proof teeth. In the street, he whistled with his lips together; in the office, with them just

parted. The sound came from somewhere behind the teeth. It was tuneless, and reminded Chris of the sound made by a gas stove when the flame is burning in the pipe. He read *Health and Strength* and detective booklets at the rate of seven per week, and whistled while he read them. He knew the names and histories of all the New York and Chicago gangsters, and was saving to buy a motor-cycle. He worked with an air of dreamy detachment—as though he were in the office but not of it. Only at rare intervals did he cease whistling, and those intervals coincided with the arrival of illustrated trade catalogues of ladies' underwear. He earned fifteen shillings a week and was quite happy.

The only other person of importance was Mr. Turnbull, the accountant. Chris hated Mr. Turnbull. He was seventy years old, and for the past forty years he had kept all the principal books of Batten & Trench, including the partners' private ledgers. He had not taken a holiday for fifteen years in case anyone should take his job for fifteen days. He was firmly convinced that if anyone took his job for fifteen days, Batten & Trench would go into liquidation.

He had handwriting that rivalled a legal engrossing clerk's, and his accuracy was superhuman. In thirty years he had only made one mistake, and that was a trifling one. The biggest mistake he had ever made was entering the service of Batten & Trench; for, once in, he would not go out again, though he had capabilities that would have commanded twice his salary anywhere else. Mr. John knew this, but he also knew Mr. Turnbull, so the salary was not increased.

He was a queer-looking old man, with a red nose. But the nose was no indication of his character, which was very abstemious. A ragged beard and side-whiskers, of a drab grey, accentuated the watery blue of the eyes and the

domelike bald head that seemed to have been fitted on at the temples, a size larger than the face warranted. He had spindle-legs, and walked with knees bent and a little springing step. He always wore an old-fashioned cutaway coat that was too short for him and stuck out behind, giving him the look of a beetle that had just learned to walk erect.

He never wasted anything; neither time, money, nor words. In the first month of Christopher's service, Mr. Turnbull only spoke to him once. Chris had entered hemp in the copra ledger. On that occasion Mr. Turnbull said:

"You're a fool." And went on with his work.

After the partners had gone in the evening, he smoked a short, briar pipe. He never knocked out the ash before refilling, and always held it precariously in the middle of his mouth, where the last of his teeth were situated. He helped to support the pipe with his lower lip, so that when he spoke, he blew, and a little cascade of sparks would shoot up and singe his moustache and whiskers.

He never believed in telling a junior anything. A junior must find out. He had had to. He always lunched in the same place—a small public house just outside the office—and always had the same food—a mutton chop, bread and cheese, and a glass of Burton.

He had absolute power over Chris. Though the hours were nominally from nine to six, for Chris they were really from nine till the nod of Mr. Turnbull and the words:

"You can go, Barrymore."

This, then, was Chris's new environment. The full staff numbered thirty, of all ages and all types. None of them had much in common except the wish to live and the need of working to do so. When they left the office, they went to the things they lived for, but for five days out of every seven, and for nine hours out of every twelve, they

were cut off from the things they lived for, by the things they lived by. Copra, hemp, and sugar they never saw, nor the big ships that brought them, but they lived by copra, hemp, and sugar, and struggled for them, and laughed, and talked, and quarrelled, and sometimes lied, for fear they might lose the chance of living by copra, hemp, and sugar.

Among them were good, bad, and indifferent; clever, foolish, and sly. In sum, they made up a small, self-contained community, working for a common end and for private gain.

The community called itself "Batten & Trench": Ffolliott called it "Pluto's Republic."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ON the twenty-first of June, the twins came of age. Actually, they had started to come of age about the fourteenth, but, as Tiny said:

“ You can’t come of age suddenly. It takes time to get things ready.”

The evening of the twenty-first was going to be a pretty big affair—not in numbers, but in quality. In number, there were to be six—the four, plus Clym and Elaine. Elaine was staying with Clym for a week. Tiny had got in such a muddle preparing to come of age, that an S.O.S. had been sent to Okebourne, and Elaine had responded.

For the evening itself, a charwoman had been engaged to wash up, and Briggs had volunteered to wait at table.

It was no ordinary coming of age, for quite apart from the fact that on the twenty-first of June one hundred and fifty pounds became legally due to the twins, and the Public Trustee ceased to be legally responsible for them, it was the first day of Chris’s first holiday in the service of Batten & Trench. The twenty-first was a Friday, and Chris had been given the Saturday morning for travelling.

At ten o’clock on the Saturday morning, the four were due to leave London in Clym’s Austin, for a fortnight in the Goolan’s cottage at Poltire, North Cornwall.

The morning of the twenty-first came in cloudless and still. Both Tiny and Chris had been thumping the barometer, night and morning, for a week, until it had become sulky and indifferent to the approach of hurricanes, typhoons,

or cloud-bursts, and refused to point to anything more exciting than "Set Fair."

All the staff of Batten & Trench knew that Chris was twenty-one that morning. He entered some hemp in the copra ledger and some sugar in the hemp ledger, and then, when he had corrected the mistake, he had to sit for a few minutes staring out of the window at the hideous warehouses across the narrow yard, and watch them change into the rocky headlands of Cornwall, and the narrow yard become the open sea in which they would bathe, all of them—Babe, Tiny, Bill, and himself.

"Mr. John's watching you, friend," muttered Ginn, and the Cornish headlands vanished and the sea dried up and became a cobbled yard, grimy with the soot of civilization.

The morning seemed interminable, and at lunch time he could eat nothing. He just had a cup of coffee and some biscuits, and went down to the Tower Bridge and watched the river and the ships, and followed them, in his mind's eye, out to the sea and the sun and the wind, and round by the chalk cliffs of Dover, and on to the Cornish cliffs of granite. Back at his desk, he tried to concentrate, but the figures in the great ledgers seemed a meaningless puzzle set by fools for other fools to solve. The sound of a ship's siren drifted in through the open window, and between the warehouses was a glint of silver. It was the river, and the river was flowing out to the sea and the sun and the wind.

"Barrymore!"

Chris sat up sharply. The voice was Mr. Turnbull's.

"Yes, sir?"

"Mr. John wants to see you."

Chris climbed down from his stool and went into the partners' room. Mr. James was away, and Chris was alone with Mr. John. And Mr. John disliked him.

Everyone in the office knew it, but no one could explain it.

"He's like that," said Ffolliott. "Takes unreasoning dislikes and never gets over them."

Chris had made a mistake—not a serious but a silly one. Mr. John knew it to be Chris's mistake, but he liked to pretend he never knew who made a mistake, in order that whoever had might make the mistake of denying it.

"Whose mistake is this, Barrymore?" he said, holding out an invoice. Chris glanced at the paper. Hemp and copra had been confused again.

"Mine, sir," said Chris.

Mr. John looked over the top of his glasses. He was a far more benevolent-looking man than his brother, and far harsher.

"An extremely careless piece of work!"

Chris said nothing. Experience had taught him that whatever he said to Mr. John was wrong. Mr. John reminded him of his father.

"In fact," continued Mr. John, "I am not at all satisfied with your work."

"I am sorry, sir."

"An ounce of forethought is worth a pound of regret," said Mr. John. He collected tags of that description and used them liberally on his staff.

Chris said nothing.

Mr. John stretched out his hand with a jerk. His fingers held the invoice.

"Take this!" he said sharply.

Chris took it.

"I shall watch your work more closely in future," said Mr. John, and bent his head over his desk again.

Chris left the room and went back to his desk. Ginn turned his head cautiously. Chris sat on his high stool, his

hands resting on the edge of the desk. The blue eyes were staring at the strip of river, and all the blue of the June sky was in their wistful intentness.

"Holidays start to-morrow, friend," muttered Ginn.

Chris turned his head quickly.

"Eh?—er—yes, of course—thanks——"

He laughed jerkily, and opened the hemp ledger.

He worked steadily till four-thirty, and at four-thirty everyone ceased work, for the swing-doors had opened and two people had entered. Chris first realized the fact because Ffolliott had left his stool and was at the counter before the rest of the staff had ceased staring.

Chris started, and slipped down from his stool. At the counter stood Tiny and Babe. They stood in the one beam of sunlight that ever penetrated into the office of Batten & Trench. It first came in May at about three in the afternoon, and came a little earlier each day till June was passed, when it began to come later, till, by October, it had ceased to come at all.

Being the twenty-first of June and a cloudless day, the beam was at its brightest.

Chris stood for a second, motionless. They were both looking for him, though they spoke to Ffolliott. They were both in summer dresses—Tiny in pale blue, Babe in pale green; both had their pretty arms bare from the shoulder, and their pretty heads half-hidden by pretty little hats; one pale blue, one pale green; one fringed with golden hair, one fringed with black. And then they saw him and both laughed softly, and waved their small hands discreetly.

Chris hurried to the counter.

"Chris darling!" they babbled together, and then Tiny continued solo: "Clym's outside with the Austin, and Bill's meeting us at five—can't you possibly get away now?"

Chris's blue eyes were full of mute despair.

"It's impossible, Tiny—and . . . you ought not to have come here."

"Excuse me!" said a rasping voice. Chris moved hurriedly. It was Mr. Turnbull. Certain of the books were kept on a shelf beneath the counter, and Mr. Turnbull wanted certain of the books.

Ffolliott glanced at the old man, and from him to Babe. Then he smiled. She smiled too, but not quite as Ffolliott had smiled. Mr. Turnbull raised his dome-like head above the counter and was about to walk back, when Tiny said:

"Er—are you Mr. Turnbull?"

Mr. Turnbull looked at her, blinking uneasily at the deep blue eyes that met his so trustfully.

"Yes—that is my name."

"I am Chris's sister," said Tiny, smiling.

"Who's Chris?" said Mr. Turnbull.

"I am, sir," said Chris.

The old man looked from one to the other.

"Humph!" he muttered, and turned to go.

But Tiny spoke again.

"Mr. Turnbull—do you think—you could possibly let my brother leave now? We're twins, and we're both twenty-one to-day."

Chris gave her one agonized glance, but she refused to look at him. Mr. Turnbull stared at her. His lower lip went in and out as though he were trying to speak, and could not. Then, suddenly, he turned to Ffolliott.

"Can you finish off Barrymore's work?" he said, brusquely.

"Of course, sir."

Mr. Turnbull looked at Chris. Then he jerked his head towards the counter.

"You can go," he said, and turned.

Tiny gasped.

"Oh, Mr. Turnbull——!"

Mr. Turnbull turned back. The lower lip was moving in and out rapidly. And then, for the first time, Chris saw him smile. It was the queerest smile man ever gave—a ghostly, shadowy expression of some mood forgotten for fifty years.

"Many happy returns of the day!" he said, and shuffled back to his stool again.

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Ffolliott.

There followed five hectic minutes, during which Babe and Tiny were introduced to Ffolliott, and Chris vanished to get his hat. When he returned, Ffolliott was talking to Babe. Tiny looked rather neglected.

He broke off when Chris joined them, and with many wishes of good luck he bade them good-bye. Forgetful of him and of everyone but themselves, the three hurried through the door. Ffolliott watched them, or more truly, he watched one. Ginn sauntered to the counter.

"Barrymore's sister?"

Ffolliott nodded.

"Pretty kid!" muttered Ginn.

Ffolliott laughed.

"I prefer the little darkie."

Ginn looked at him.

"He's engaged to her, isn't he?"

"He's supposed to be," said Ffolliott, and walked back to his desk.

The three were halfway down the stairs.

"So that's Ffolliott, is it?" said Babe, thoughtfully.

Chris nodded.

"Yes—he's a charming fellow, isn't he?"

"He seems all right," she answered carelessly.

Clym sat at the wheel, imperturbable. Tiny climbed in beside him.

The car started, and Chris took off his hat. Babe heard a faint sigh, and glanced at him. He looked pale and tired. It was the more noticeable because there was always Tiny to compare him with. So strong a similarity in features and colouring had made of her a sort of standard by which to measure the change in him. For she was as fresh and untarnished as she had been when Babe had first seen her sitting on the tomb in Okebourne churchyard. The warm cheeks had not been denied fresh air and sunshine, the pretty little mouth had never needed to do anything but smile or laugh, nor the deep blue eyes to look anywhere except to heaven in thankfulness for the wonders of the earth she lived on. A feeling of resentfulness came to Babe. Why should it be that he had to lose his colour and his good spirits, just because he was a man, and Tiny be able to keep both, because she was a woman?

The car had turned into Eastcheap now, and the hot street was heavy with the smell of fish. The porters in their erstwhile white smocks, now soiled with dust and blood, walked by, balancing on their queer, black, padded helmets the piled boxes of fish.

Chris was quiet. Much too quiet for his twenty-first birthday. She snuggled close to him, and, taking his hand, raised it to her lips.

"Tired, Chris boy?"

"Just a bit, Babe." He smiled as he answered.

She pressed her cheek against his, but the dark eyes were moody.

"I don't see why you should go on slaving in that beastly hole while Tiny does nothing."

There was a pause.

"It won't be for long now, Babe, and when she's married I can chance things more—and somehow, I'd hate her to have to do the sort of thing I'm doing. You're different.

You're doing something that matters, but she's got no gift, and all she could do would be typewriting and shorthand, and that's enough to take the edge off any girl, especially a sensitive kid like Tiny."

There was a pause.

"I'll be glad when she is married," said Babe suddenly. "Then... well... perhaps you'll think of... of us a bit."

He held her chin and turned her face up to his. She looked sweetly sulky, and coloured, and blinked her eyes, and finally hid them beneath the long, dusky lashes.

"You know that's not fair, don't you, Babe?"

But the red lips set stubbornly and would not answer. So Chris kissed them. The dusky lashes fluttered and the big black eyes peeped through.

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Of course not, darling, but isn't it 'booful'?"

The red lips twitched reluctantly and a smile came.

And then he told her of Mr. John.

She tossed her head contemptuously.

"The fool—who cares whether he sells his rotten copra and hemp? It was madness ever letting you go into such a hole. I told Bill so at the time. You're wasted as a clerk. The last thing you wrote—In Praise of Indiscipline—was good—really good—and Clym thinks so."

"Does he really?" Chris said eagerly.

"Yes, honest—he told me so."

There was a pause.

"He hasn't said a word to me about it. I was beginning to think he'd put it on one side and forgotten it."

"Clym never forgets anything."

"I believe you're right," he said slowly, and added, "Look here, Babe, I'm going to stick it at Batten & Trench's. I must have something to live on, but... well, I'm going to write like the devil in my spare time."

"Good, darling!—and I'll paint like the devil, and then, before very long—we'll——" She gave a little laugh, and pressing her cheek to his, she whispered in his ear.

Chris nodded, sighed, and closed his eyes.

"Two devils, darling," he corrected.

Bill was waiting for them at Follards, in Piccadilly, and they had a very noisy tea, after which they drove to the flat. Briggs opened the door and led them proudly into the sitting-room.

"Oh! Doesn't it look simply too divinely delightful?" said Tiny, standing at the head of the table.

The table had been lengthened by the addition of two Tate's cube sugar boxes, but they were invisible beneath the white cloth, as the white cloth was almost invisible beneath the cutlery and silver, and glasses, and flowers, and dishes of fruit, and an enormous white cake set with forty-two little candles that were yet to be lit—twenty-one pink candles for Chris, and twenty-one blue candles for Tiny.

Clym was put at the head of the table, Elaine at the foot. Tiny was on Clym's right, Chris to the right hand of Elaine; from which it followed inevitably that Bill was on Elaine's left hand and the Babe on the left hand of Clym.

"Admirable," said Clym, "I'm among the maidens and Elaine is with the youths. Briggs—the rum ration."

"Yessir!"

A divine "pop" sounded, and the bubbles blinked at Briggs, and Briggs blinked at the bubbles. As he filled Clym's glass, Clym whispered:

"Keep back a glass for yourself and the good woman in the kitchen. By the way, Briggs—I hope she is a good woman."

"She's sixty, sir," whispered Briggs.

"Carry on, Briggs. All women are good at sixty."

The wine flowed and the conversation flowed with it.

The food vanished and the laughter grew louder. Then Briggs drew the curtains and Clym lit the forty-two candles.

"Briggs—Lights out!"

"Yessir!"

The switch clicked and the room was in darkness, save for the light from forty-two little candles—twenty-one little pink ones for Chris, and twenty-one little blue ones for Tiny.

The warm yellow glow shone upward upon the four young faces, flushed, laughing, with blue eyes sparkling and black eyes dancing. The ends of the table were in dimmer light, and in the dimmer light sat Clym and Elaine, watching.

"How are the stores, Briggs?" said Clym.

"One bottle of champagne, sir, and three of port."

"Good!—report to the good woman in the kitchen, Briggs—full marching order, and a bottle of port."

"Yessir—only, sir—well sir—she's gigglin' now."

"Is she?—Oh—er—well . . . don't report then, Briggs."

"No, sir."

Clym stood up.

"Ladies and gentlemen—the King!"

They all stood up and clinked glasses, and said:

"The King!—the King!"

"Gawd bless him, sir!" said Briggs, from the darkness.

"Who'll cake the cut?" murmured Bill, dreamily.

"Report for orders to-morrow morning, Bill," said Clym, and rose again.

"Ladies and gentlemen: it is my great privilege to-night——"

"Who'll cuke the cate?" murmured Bill again.

Four little candles went out—two little pink ones of Christopher's and two little blue ones of Tiny's.

Clym coughed.

"Gentles and ladymen!" he said.

"Who'll cake the cuke?" murmured Bill, piteously.

Eight little candles burnt out—four little pink ones and four little blue.

"Oh, I feel so happy!" crooned Tiny.

"Briggs," said Clym, "Dis—miss!"

Briggs saluted, turned smartly and vanished. As he opened the door, there came the sound of Lyceum laughter from the direction of the kitchen.

"Jadies and Lentlemen!" said Clym firmly.

"Shurrrup!" said everybody.

"Certainly!" said Clym, and sat down again.

Six little candles burned out—three little pink candles and three little blue.

"To the Twins!" said Elaine, and stood up.

"Precisely!" said Clym, and stood up too.

Babe and Bill did likewise.

"The Twins!—The Twins!—Chris darling!—Tiny darling!"

The brims chinked and two more little candles burnt out—one little pink candle and one little blue.

"Stand up, Babe!" said Chris suddenly.

Obediently, she stood up.

"Give me your hand."

She gave him her hand. His own closed upon it, the fingers moved, and she was free again.

He laughed joyously.

"I have to announce an engagement between Miss Babe Goolan and Mr. Chris Barrymore!"

She stood staring at her hand. On the third finger, something sparkled and shone.

"Chris!" she said, unsteadily.

Tiny and Bill jumped up.

"Let's have a look!"

They tugged at her hand. Unresisting, she let them

hold it, and Clym and Elaine bent forward and looked too.

And over the bent heads, Babe looked at Chris and Chris looked at Babe, and between them passed something that none saw.

And, suddenly, they were in darkness, for the last two candles had gone out, and there were no more pink candles for Chris, and no more blue candles for Tiny.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT was just half-past eight as the car drove off. Bill was at the wheel, and Tiny was beside him. In the back were Chris and Babe, hatless and heedless. Above them all was the tender blue of a cloudless June sky.

Eleven o'clock found them at Salisbury—the Salisbury of a summer Saturday morning, packed with people and cars, and flooded with sunlight, and noisy with life.

They drew up at the Crown Hotel—Chris said his tonsils had “seized.” They all got out—Tiny and Bill through the doors; Chris and Babe over the back. They went into the commercial room and found it full of smoke and farmers, and noisy with the rattle of tankards and the “burr” of west-country voices.

And they all sat on a long, shiny leather settle, and rhapsodized over old prints on the walls, and cases of stuffed fish, and foxes, and drabbled birds. And Bill and Chris had a pint of Old Sarum, and Tiny and Babe had each a long glass of gin and ginger-beer. And because they were all young, and all pleasant to look upon, and all happy, and all laughing, all those who saw them had a word for them, and an eye for Tiny's curly head and Babe's brown arms.

And then Salisbury was behind them and they were roaring up the long steep hill on the road to Blandford and the western sea.

“Stamp on the juice, Billy!” called Babe wildly, her eyes alight, her hair waving in the rush of the wind.

Bill stamped on the juice, and the long, lean road of

Hadrian's legions rushed to meet them, and the high chalk banks fell away, and they were up—up on the chalk lands—on the long undulating green of the plateau, where lay scattered the last bleaching stones of the forgotten temples of a vanished race, that had known the sun and the sweet air and the wind, as these their irresponsible progeny knew and tasted them in the sweet mad rush to happiness and the western sea.

At Blandford they tasted the first cyder at a little white inn on the brink of the river. And they all agreed that cyder was good, and never better than when drunk on a bench in the sunlight, with the birds in full song and the river in murmurous threnody beneath the shadow of languorous willows.

Then Bill stamped on the juice again, and all Dorset rushed to meet them. In the hazy blue of the shire's boundary rose the dim, humped line of the Purbeck Hills, and across heathland came the wind, medicinal, winey, with the garnered scent of pine and gorse and bracken, and invigorating with the damp tang of peat.

The capital of the county beckoned to them, with spires and roofs, and they raced between lush green water meadows, over streams of sparkling blue, and bridges of lichen-tinted stone.

They lunched at the Red Deer, in a huge room filled with huge men, with huge appetites. They had a seat in a huge bay-window and looked down into a street crowded with cattle in dusty cavalcade for an unknown Calvary. And they had more cyder, and vowed it was better than the last; and they ate cold roast beef and pickles, and new potatoes, and a whole pie of apples and cranberries, and finished a whole jug of cream, and turned to Dorset's Blue Vinney cheese and more cyder, and finished soberly with coffee and sighs.

And then Bill stamped on the juice again, and they left Dorset, and in the hot, slumbrous afternoon raced on into Devon. And Chris and Babe dozed in each other's arms, and were jolted into semi-consciousness, and kissed and swooned again. And over all of them was the brilliant blue of the June sky.

They had tea at Exeter, five cups each, and an aggregate of twenty rolls, with a pound of cream and a pot of jam, and they all champed mustard and cress, and talked with little green tendrils sprouting from the corners of their mouths.

And then Bill stamped on the juice again, and swart Dartmoor loomed up, glowing in the golden evening sun.

The rich exuberance of the day was passing. Westward the sky was changing from blue to golden. Coral tints edged the dusky protuberances of the moor, and in the hollows was blue mist—the great Earth's offering of incense to the mighty Sun.

And the evening's hush touched the hearts that had beat so madly through the day's abundance. Tiny's head rested against Bill's shoulder. Chris was awake—eyes staring into the sun-filled west; one arm was round Babe's shoulders, as she lay against him, and one hand just moved upon the cool flesh of the smooth brown arm.

For mile upon mile the black telegraph posts sped by, while always ahead they stretched in a long, converging avenue, lining the shimmering road, that rose, and dipped, and bent, and twined, on its way to sunset and the western sea.

At seven o'clock Babe relieved Bill at the wheel, and Chris sat beside her, and Tiny sighed gratefully as she vanished in the rough tweed arms of Bill's coat.

And the miles sped under them, and the sun sank, and sinking, took shape in the heat-mist, and the telegraph wires were molten, and soft brown shadows of the poles striped

the road and flickered upon the young faces, with eyes staring into the sun-filled west.

The road bent suddenly, and they were in a village of grey stone and lichened roofs, and a squat dun church now darkling to black against the burning sky.

It was the last stage of their journey, and as the village slipped away they gained the swart immensity of Roughter Moor. Like a long, livid scar, the road seared the gloomy heath, while to the westward the land seemed to cease abruptly in ink-black contour against the sky.

Babe accelerated, and the little car bounded forward.

"Chris boy!"

"Yes, darling?"

"When I tell you to—will you promise to close your eyes and not open them again till I say you may?"

"I promise—but why?"

She caught her breath in a little, happy laugh.

"There's just one place, and one hour, and one mood to see Poltire for the first time, and the first time I saw it I . . . I vowed that . . . if . . . if ever I loved anyone—badly, I mean, like I love you—I would bring him here and show him what I loved . . . at the one place, and at the one hour, and in the one mood."

She glanced at him and smiled a little self-consciously. She felt she was becoming emotional, so she added:

"And now I'm going to simply jump like hell on the juice!"

She jumped, and the car jumped too, and the moor engulfed them in its swarthy embrace. The engine hummed and the air roared past their ears, and the sun touched the earth and drenched the dun heath in a bath of blood.

"Close your eyes, Chris."

He obeyed, and sat back, listening to the rush of the wind and the hum of the engine.

He heard the gears change and felt the incline as the car roared upward. Again the gears changed, and the air was suddenly cooler. A moment later, the car stopped.

After the roar of the wind and the hum of the engine, the first impression was of a deep silence. Then he was aware of a faint hollow sighing, and knew it for the voice of the sea. Warm lips were pressed to his, and he heard a whisper :

“ Open your eyes, Chris ! ”

He obeyed. Daylight had almost gone, and the car had come to rest between two great, quarried hills, that rose sheer from the roadside, like the walls of a tunnel. Ahead was sunset and the sea—a great restlessness, purple, umber and jet, and veined with narrow paths of shimmering gold. Far below was Poltore Cove—a small horseshoe, carved out of the soot-black cliffs, distinguishable only by a narrow fringe of restless foam, that crept, whispering, about the cliff base, pallid and luminous in the twilight.

The horizon glowed, as though beneath the great dark rim of the sea, a mighty fire burned; and westward, a nebulous line of land stretched out into the dying fire, and the bright white eye of a lighthouse blinked at the immensity of sea and sky.

A breath of wind came up from the cove, whispering among the quarried rocks, and the hollow sighing of the sea rose up, and died away again.

Chris sat motionless, his eyes staring into the fading splendour. From the back of the car came the excited little voice of Tiny. She was chattering tirelessly.

“ Babe ! ” whispered Chris.

“ Yes, dear ? ”

“ Come with me . . . I want you . . . alone.”

She turned her head, and, feeling for his hand, pressed it gently and nodded. He stepped out, and she followed him.

“ Where are you going ? ” exclaimed Tiny.

"Only a few yards down the road," answered Chris. "Just to get a smell of the sea. You stay with Bill."

He slipped his arm through Babe's and they began to walk away.

"Don't be long," called Tiny. "I'm dying to see the cottage."

He did not answer, but when they were out of earshot, he whispered:

"Are you dying to see the cottage, Babe?"

She laughed softly, and pressed his arm against her side. But she made no answer, for none was needed.

In silence they walked on, till they reached a bend, and there below lay the village, a cluster of twinkling lights, backed by the dark waters of the cove. By the roadside was a little recess, scooped out of the rock, and lined with turf.

"This will do," said Chris.

Side by side they stood in the small embrasure, hips touching. The line of the horizon was fading slowly, and sky was merging with sea in one vast dome of darkness. The white eye of the lighthouse pierced the night, and a faint arc swept, fanwise, from east to west.

"Babe, it was good—what you did . . . keeping my eyes closed till . . . you kissed me."

The curve of her slim hip felt warm through the thin summer frock.

"I knew you'd be glad, Chris, and . . . I wanted it to happen that way—not for you just to see it, but for me to show it you . . . it's . . . well, it's as if, somehow, I'd given it to you."

He turned his head slowly and peered at her pale face, and took her in his arms, and kissed her; and her eyes closed, and her lips trembled, and all the line of her young body met his in passionate aspiration.

A fitful breath of wind came up from the cove, and the hollow sighing of the sea welled up and died away again.

"And you'll wait for me, Babe—won't you? . . . if . . . if I'm a long time before I—I'm any use. Because I'm not much use just now . . . and, Babe, I get panicky sometimes—in case I lose you . . . before I'm any good at anything."

"You'll never lose me, Chris," she whispered.

"Coo—ee!"

The little, fairy-like voice of Tiny floated to them in the darkness. Babe laughed softly and took his arm.

"Come along."

As they moved away, she added:

"She's a sweet kid—Tiny."

Chris laughed quietly.

"Of course she is—but if I said it, you'd pout."

"Not now, darling."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

POLTIRE was still almost unknown. It had no ruins and no legends, only sand and sea, and a little stone jetty, and a dozen fishing boats that set out each evening at sunset, and returned each day at dawn. It was a huddled little village, with houses tumbling over each other down a steep hill, and only preserved from the fate of the Gadarene swine by a sea-wall and the Poltire Arms, a low-built, whitewashed inn, with nothing but a strip of cobble stones between its windows and the coping of the sea-wall.

The Goolans' cottage stood aloof from the general scramble to the sea. Perched on the very top of the cliff, it was surrounded by a white stone wall, and from its windows both shore and sea were visible for a radius of nearly twenty miles.

Thirty yards from the front door, the edge of the cliff cut the sky, and the springy turf ceased in a fringe of wiry bents that quivered eternally in the breath of the wind.

It was to this earthly paradise that Chris awoke the next morning at six o'clock. He awoke at the touch of a pair of warm lips, and, opening his eyes, stared sleepily into the laughing eyes of Babe.

"Come on, lazybones! Here's a cup of tea. I want to show you Poltire before the others awake."

He sat up.

"Darling! Do you normally wear a bath towel?"

She laughed.

"It isn't a bath towel—it's a bathing wrap, and underneath, Chris—there's a most marvellous bathing costume."

She put the cup in his hand, and, running to the window, threw it open.

"Oh, Chris—it's simply marvellous—there isn't a cloud, and the sea's like silver, and it all smells winey and wonderful!"

He put down his cup and slipped out of bed. His hair was tousled and his cheeks warm. Very softly, he tiptoed to the window and slipped his arm round the bent body.

She started, turned her head, smiled, and took his kisses. Then she gave him a little push.

"Go back to bed—you wicked thing . . . you're not decently clad."

"Neither are you, darling—and—this bathing costume . . . let me see if it will pass the censor."

She turned, and leaned with her back against the sill. One small hand peeped out of the wrap, holding the folds together. Head and shoulders were in silver-edged silhouette against a silver sea.

"If I take off the wrap . . . you'll gloat—I know you will, because you're a nasty little man."

She paused for an instant, and sighed.

"You do look sweet in your pyjams, Chris."

"Don't gloat!" said Chris.

And then they laughed and kissed, and she slipped off the wrap and stood posed for judgment, a slim vision in green milanese.

"You may well blush!" said Chris severely.

"I'm not blushing!"

"You are!"

"I—I'm not . . . and . . . don't you like it?"

"It's all right as far as it goes, darling, but it doesn't go very far, does it?"

She threw up her head.

"Very well—if you don't like it, I'll take it off."

"Shall I help you, darling?"

"Beast!" she said, and stooped for her wrap.

"Oh! you can stoop in it?"

She paused in the act of picking up the wrap. The dark eyes were peeping up at him.

"Chris . . . is . . . is it too . . . ?"

"No, darling—not half enough!"

She laughed softly and stood up again.

"Drink your tea, and put yours on—and we'll have a bathe before breakfast."

"Good! One can't really judge a bathing costume till it's wet."

She smiled.

"You are a horrid little man—but you do like it, don't you?"

"It's more fitting than seemly," said Chris.

They ran all the way down to the sea, and across the sand, and met the waves with laughter and a shower of spray. The cove was full of sunlight, and the sea was green, with paths of deep blue and indigo. Floating on their backs, they stared up at the sky, and at the gulls, soaring with outstretched wings, pale white and softly translucent.

And then they raced back home again, wet and shining, and breathless and tingling.

On the doorstep stood Bill and Tiny, sedately dressed—Bill in a grey flannel suit, Tiny in a white serge skirt and jumper.

Tiny's blue eyes opened wide.

"Oh, Babe! what a perfectly marvellous costume!" She turned to Bill excitedly. "Billy—I simply must get one like that!"

Bill laughed.

"You simply mustn't! The one you've got is quite candid enough."

Babe flushed.

"You mean . . . this one's . . . not nice?"

"My dear Babe, you can do as you like, but there are other people in the village, and if I were Chris, I shouldn't like it."

"Pardon me, Bill," said Chris, "If you were Chris—you'd love it."

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with it," exclaimed Tiny. "It's just sweet."

Babe raised her nose.

"You're a prude, Bill," she said, and walked into the house.

For the first day or two they kept together, walking in the mornings, bathing in the afternoons, and in the evenings exploring the rocks and promontories of Poltore Cove.

Chris and Babe took to their bathing costumes and lived in them. The weather was cloudless and torrid, and the sea rolled in in long, lazy undulations that broke in a smother of foam, filling the cove with sibilant echoes.

It was the bathing costumes that first led to the pairing. Bill favoured them as afternoon attire, when there was nothing else to do, but to swim, and talk, and doze. But for all other forms of diversion he maintained they should be properly clad, particularly when they drove into Penzeth.

Penzeth was ten miles away—a growing town with an esplanade, and a band, and smart people, and cars. When Babe and Chris insisted on no additional covering except a pair of school blazers, and walked the esplanade arm-in-arm, with bare limbs, burned a rich golden brown, Bill said "it wasn't done."

Thereafter, Tiny and Bill went to Penzeth alone, and

went most afternoons—Bill in the well-cut grey flannel suit, Tiny in her best summer dress.

Chris and Babe would watch them go, and as the car vanished, would kiss, and turn and run down to the sea and the sun and the sand.

But Bill's growing convention extended beyond trips to Penzeth. He was inclined to veto the more venturesome expeditions planned by Chris. There were other coves than Poltire, but Poltire alone was accessible from the land. The others could only be reached by taking *Jane*, the old white boat that belonged to the landlord of the Poltire Arms.

"You can see all you want to see from the top of the cliff," said Bill, "and if you actually went to these other coves, they're only just sand and rock, the same as Poltire."

"But there are caves in Tregasket Cove—with seals in them—asleep on the ledges," said Babe eagerly.

"Are there really?" exclaimed Tiny, the blue eyes alight. Bill laughed.

"You are a lot of kids—getting excited over seals!"

"I like seals," said Chris reflectively, "they look so deliciously nude."

"Do let's go, Billy!" urged Tiny.

They were all in their bathing costumes, lying on the sand.

"I thought you wanted to learn golf," said Bill. "I was going to run you into Penzeth."

Tiny hesitated. Slowly she traced a pattern in the sand with her finger. Lying on his side, Chris watched her, a curious intentness in his eyes.

"Which would you prefer to do, Bill?" she said suddenly, looking up.

"Well—of course—I'd prefer golf—but——"

She jumped up.

"So would I."

Chris rolled over on his back and stared up at the sky.

A big gull was wheeling between the headlands—wheeling and calling the sad sweet call of solitude and the sea.

"We'd better get back to lunch," said Bill.

Babe began to collect the towels and thermos flasks. Bill helped her, holding out the big plaited bag for her to pack.

Tiny looked down at Chris. He still lay on his back, staring up at the blue sky.

A faint sigh moved the small breasts, and she dropped on her knees beside him.

"You're miles away, aren't you, Chris?"

"Miles!"

"Where?" she asked uneasily.

He looked at her for a moment or two, and smiled.

"'Outside Eden,' Tiny."

Before she could answer he had jumped to his feet.

As they finished lunch, the postman came, bringing a letter for Bill. They were drinking a cup of postprandial coffee; Tiny and Bill dressed for Penzeth, the other two, still in their costumes, with bare limbs, still sprinkled with sand.

"It's from Uncle Joe," said Bill, with an excited laugh, "and it may mean good news."

He looked at the letter and read quickly. Then suddenly he jumped up.

"Tiny darling! Listen to this."

"DEAR BILL,

"Thanks for your letter, particularly for the request for a trifling increase of fifty pounds in salary. I suppose you won't be happy till you're married to that little curly-headed baby of yours, so I've decided to grant your request. You're not worth the additional expense, but you may be when you can attend to business again, instead of continually running off after Tiny. The increase will date from the 1st January."

He dropped the letter and rushed round the table. Tiny rushed to meet him.

"Have a cigarette, Babe?" said Chris, passing his case.

She took one and lit it, and turning her head stared out of the window.

A confused babble was going on—a babble that consisted principally of the words "darling," "heavenly," and "marvellous."

Chris blew out a cloud of smoke. Then very gently he put out his hand and touched Babe's slim, warm thigh. She turned her head quickly.

"Our turn, one day," he whispered.

She nodded and smiled, and looked out of the window again.

Bill resumed his seat.

"We'll get married on New Year's Day, darling."

"How absolutely marvellous!" breathed Tiny.

"It'll just give us nice time to look round, and get a house and furniture," continued Bill.

Tiny nodded excitedly. Then she glanced at Chris. He was holding his cigarette in front of him, watching the lazy spiral of smoke curl up. And seeing the look in his eyes, her own lost their enchantment.

"Chris—what will you do . . . about the flat . . . and the furniture?"

Babe turned her head. In the small, sun-filled room was silence. Dreams were changing into realities.

Chris drew at his cigarette and allowed the smoke to escape through his nostrils. Then suddenly he looked at Tiny and laughed.

"Why—there's no difficulty there, Tiny. I shall go into rooms, and take my share of Mother's furniture with me."

"Quite," said Bill hurriedly, "and of course, the rest,

the instalment lot—well, we can take over that and keep up the instalments.”

“Of course,” said Chris.

There was a pause. Babe was making a little crater in the salt-cellar, patting the sloping sides with the small spoon.

“What’s the rent of the flat, Chris?” she said thoughtfully.

“Fifty,” said Chris laconically.

Tiny turned to Bill excitedly.

“Billy . . . I’ve a marvellous idea. Why not keep on the flat—it’s a dear little place—and then Chris needn’t clear out. He could just keep his bedroom and live with us until he and Babe marry.”

Bill looked awkwardly at Chris. Chris laughed.

“Tiny dear—it’s awfully nice of you, but it’s radiantly impracticable. I mean—I’d feel most frightfully *de trop*, living with a newly-married couple.”

Bill glanced at him gratefully.

“Besides, Tiny dear,” he said, “it wouldn’t be really big enough. I want you to have a house—not a flat.”

He picked up the letter and went on reading.

Chris saw him frown.

“What’s the matter, Bill?”

“Well, there’s a bit about you in here.”

Tiny and Babe became suddenly alert.

“What is it?” said Babe.

“I’ll tell you later, Chris,” answered Bill.

Chris glanced out of the window and back again.

“Let’s have it now, Bill.” He held out his hand.

Reluctantly, Bill passed the letter. Tiny and Babe sidled close to Chris, and read over his shoulders.

“I met John MacFadyen the other day and he doesn’t speak very well of Chris. Says he takes no interest in his

work and is constantly making mistakes. If you get the chance, you'd better tell Chris this, or get Babe to do so. As you know, I like the boy, but I can't help thinking he isn't too fond of work. Perhaps you'd better get Babe to tackle him. She may be able to make him pull himself together.

“ Love to all,
“ Your affect. Uncle,
JOSEPH.”

Chris raised his eyes.

“ Thanks, Bill.”

He stood up and stretched his arms above his head. The smooth muscles rippled beneath the sunburned flesh. The curly hair was tangled with the dried salt of the sea, and on the lithe, brown thighs was the powder of dry sand.

Bill took the letter. In the flannel suit, dark blue collar, and neat bow tie, he typified much that was good in life—a secure income, common sense, deep affections, a taste for pleasant things, for a comfortable home, and a charming wife, and a child or two to keep him young, and a liking for his work, and an interest in money, and a belief, essentially English, in all things English—in the English climate, customs, manners, and morals.

Chris picked up an old white cricketing hat and tugged it on. Beneath its drooping brim, the blue eyes were thoughtful.

“ I'm just going down to the village to get some fags. Shan't be long.”

He turned and was gone, and the door clicked behind him.

Bill sighed.

“ He doesn't seem to worry much.”

Babe stood up, her hands holding to the edge of the table, the small breasts standing out defiantly beneath the thin costume.

"You're a clumsy fool, Bill!" she said tensely. "You've hurt him—hurt him right inside, and you're too blind to see it—because you can't see any further than the end of your own nose."

Bill flushed angrily.

"And you're too blind to see his faults."

Tiny stood up. The small hands were clenched and the blue eyes stormy.

"He's got no faults!" she cried, and stamped her foot. "He's too . . . too damn decent to all of us . . . and you don't understand him . . . and I do . . . and when Father was alive . . . I'd have died . . . if I hadn't been for Chris . . . and—ever since . . . he's kept me comfy and happy . . . while he's been sweating in that vile office. And he's always looked after me and always thought of me—and it was he who hit Kilbey when he kissed me—not you! And you show him that letter now . . . now, of all times . . . when we've got everything and he and Babe have got nothing except each other. And I won't marry you in January . . . I won't marry you at all . . . at least, not till Chris is married!"

She finished in a storm of tears and was gone, out of the room and the house, and passed the window, running.

Bill stood up, awkwardly.

"I say, Babe——" he began.

And then Babe burst into tears too, and ran up to her bedroom.

Meanwhile, Chris was lying on the turf beside the pathway that led down to the village. With chin propped in his hands, he stared down over the rim of the cliff to the little miniature cove beneath.

And suddenly he heard footsteps, and Tiny was kneeling beside him and pulling his shoulders, and crying as she had

not cried since the day when Miss Barrymore had offered to take her away.

Awkwardly, he sat up and put his arms round her, and patted her back, and said silly inconsequential things.

She blurted out her ultimatum to Bill.

"I'll not marry him, Chris—not till you're settled with Babe . . . I won't . . . I won't leave you all alone after all you've done for me, and . . . all we've done together."

He kissed her impulsively, and then laughed awkwardly.

"Don't be silly, Tiny dear. I mean . . . Bill's right, really. I've rather let his uncle down at Batten & Trench's."

There followed gentle recriminations—Tiny defending him, Chris condemning himself. And after recriminations some castles-in-the-air—castles built by Chris, to please Tiny, for he did not deceive himself. He talked of his writing and what Babe thought of it, and of her painting, and how she'd begun to earn money, and of his private income of seventy-five pounds a year, and of his age—only twenty-one—with plenty of time in which to make up for lost time.

And after a while Tiny stopped sniffing and smiled, and Chris stopped talking and laughed.

"But I'm glad Bill read that letter, for one thing, Tiny."

"What's that?"

He tugged at a clump of grass.

"I rather thought . . . that . . . that I was passing right out, and . . . I don't want to. I mean . . . marriage is all right, but," he turned suddenly, "don't let it change you too much, Tiny."

There was a little puzzled frown on her forehead.

"Change me, Chris?—Why should it?"

"It does sometimes, and—well, I'd always hoped we'd still keep this sort of thing up—and keep together, all of us when we were married. I mean, we're only young once,

and when we're thirty we shan't want to do mad things, and, I want to keep mad as long as I can."

She nodded vigorously.

"I'll keep mad, Chris, and so will Billy—I'll keep him mad—you see."

They walked back to the house, and found Bill and Babe in deck chairs, in the garden, friendly and earnest.

Babe took Tiny's arm and led her indoors.

Chris looked at Bill and grinned sheepishly.

"Tiny's all right, Bill—she goes off pop like that sometimes."

Bill scratched his head.

"Chris, I've been an awful squirt—I—er—I'm not the 'arty' type, and—I'm afraid I'm a bit slow-witted at times. Babe's been talking to me, and—er—I—hadn't seen it that way—I mean, that commercial work doesn't suit everyone. And you've been most awfully good to Tiny, and . . . well, I realize . . . that she couldn't have been the sweet kid she is, if—er—if you hadn't looked after her."

He paused, rather red in the face.

"That's all right, Bill," said Chris hurriedly.

Above their heads a window opened and Tiny peeped down.

"Kissed yet? "

They all met again in the sitting-room.

"I've got a suggestion," said Chris.

"What is it? "

"We're not fit to be alone, without a pukka adult. I vote we wire for Clym."

Tiny raised her blue eyes to heaven.

"Clym!—the most marvellous male in Christendom! "

"Eh? " said Bill.

"You're in heathendom, darling," she said, and kissed him.

Then they all walked down to the little post office, and Chris wrote out a wire :

“S.O.S. No money. No alc. Quarrelling. Come at once.”

They all read it through and laughed excitedly, and then, to save money, Chris signed it with a composite name that read : “Christinybabebill.”

At lunch time the next day, the answer came :

“ In need of alcoholiday. Arrive 3.30 Friday. Clym.”

“ Good ! ” they all sighed thankfully.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

CLYM'S telegram had come at eleven o'clock in the morning, and as he was due himself the next day, Chris suggested that they all pleased themselves for their last day alone.

"He'll insist on us all keeping together, Bill, so if you want to give Tiny a lesson in golf you'd better do it to-day. Babe and I will go to Tregasket Cove."

The suggestion was adopted, and the Austin vanished on the road to Penzeth. Chris turned to Babe exultantly:

"Now, darling—we're going to have a whole day's perfect paganism!"

It was just twelve as they launched *Jane*. Gripping the gunwales, they splashed into the sea, heaving and straining till the boat rode free.

"Now!" called Chris, and they both jumped and scrambled in, wet to the waist.

The gods were kind to them. The thermometer was creeping up to ninety, the tide served, the sea was as calm as ever the Cornish sea can be. They had a big basket full of lunch and tea, a thermos flask of coffee, a Japanese sunshade of jade green, cushions, towels, sweaters, cigarettes and chocolates. Never before had *Jane* carried so precious a cargo.

He wore the old white cricket hat; she, a little black beret, slantwise upon the small black head. In the little

cars were the little green ear-rings, and on each brown arm a golden bracelet, worn just above the elbow.

"Those bracelets make you look deliciously slavelike, Babe, and to-day I feel masterful and Sultanish."

"I would remind you that the real purpose of our journey is to see seals."

"Purpose, or excuse, darling?"

He saw her brown shoulders quiver with suppressed laughter.

The lazy sea slipped under them in long, languid undulations that made *Jane* curtsy gracefully.

He eyed the slender back and boyish hips. From the waist down the wet costume was a darker green, and clung shamelessly to her figure.

"You got very wet, Babe."

"I know, darling, but I'm drying fast."

"Don't hurry, darling!"

"Gloating?"

"With both eyes!"

Jane curtsied on, came abreast of the headland, and met the open sea with little gurglings and shivers. Beyond the headland were bigger waves that rose up suddenly, vitreous, with the sun shining through, and subsided, sidling by and slapping *Jane* saucily. Her head swung round and the crew bent to the oars, and the headland frowned down, presenting a blackened, storm-scarred front, laved by a fringe of snow white foam.

At intervals Chris turned his head, till at last, beyond Poltire Point, he saw the out-jutting promontory of Tregasket Cap.

"Ten more good strokes, Babe, and we can rest."

They counted them aloud, bending their backs in time to the call of their voices, and the boat sidled and dipped, and the oars creaked in the thole-pins, and the sea slid under them

and rolled on to meet the cliff base in a surge of sound and foam.

"Ten!" called Chris. "Easy all!"

They rested on their oars and the boat drifted on into the calm waters of Tregasket Cove. She peeped over her shoulder, chin nestling against the warm flesh, eyes laughing, lips just visible.

"Isn't the sun terrific, Chris? Just touch my back—it's baking!"

He shipped his oar and slipped forward on his knees. The black eyes blinked, and she turned her head. Lightly he held her hips, and kissed the warm flesh between the shoulders. She gave a little shiver and laughed softly.

"I said touch, darling, not kiss!"

"Well, darling, kissing is touching."

"Yes, darling—but touching is not necessarily kissing."

"My touching is, darling—absolutely necessarily!"

A long wave rolled in, and they were lifted up and borne towards the shore. The sea was at half-tide, and ebbing, and the sand shallowed, and the keel churned the sand. They jumped out into the water, waist deep, and, waiting for the next wave, ran the boat in.

They carried their cargo to the shadow of a great rock that rose from the yellow sand like some titanic monolith. Behind them towered the black cliff, riven in the centre to form a deep V-shaped gully, spouting a jet of clear water that fell with hardly a tremor, to hit an out-jutting boulder a few feet below, and spread fanwise in a cascade that caught the sunlight and sparkled with the tints of the rainbow.

And hot and thirsty, they ran hand-in-hand and stood in the shower, and gasped, and laughed, and kissed, and opened their mouths and drank; and their brown limbs were flecked with the rainbow hues, and shone gleaming wet in the sunshine.

II

They spread their lunch in the shadow of the big rock, and babbled nonsense, and kissed with lips and cheeks cool and wet from the water of the cascade.

Then they sat down, side by side, legs folded tailor-fashion, and ate cold veal-and-ham pie and potato salad, and lettuces and tomatoes, and talked with their mouths full because their hearts were too full to wait for their mouths to empty.

"Think of those two asses playing golf!" said Chris.

She laughed and held out one finger, all over salad dressing, and popped it into his mouth.

"Don't you ever take to golf, darling."

"No," mumbled Chris as well as he could with her finger still in his mouth.

She gave a little bubbling laugh and tugged her finger free again.

"Isn't your mouth lovely and warm inside, Chris?"

"Booful!" murmured Chris, and reached for the peaches and cream.

The boat lay high and dry on her side, and on the wet shining sand a little sand-piper ran fussily, stabbing with its rapier beak for the sluggish worms.

A gull was wheeling above their heads, and cast a faint shadow that drifted across the yellow sand.

"I'm growing old," said Chris suddenly.

The black eyes became anxious.

"Darling—you can't—it simply isn't done."

"Sorry, darling, but I am growing old."

"What are the symptoms?"

"I've got a hair on my chest—a real one—very fair, but unmistakably a hair. I pulled it and it hurt, so I know it's a hair."

She broke into a peal of laughter, and the echo came back from the black cliffs and mingled with the sighing of the sea.

Obliquely, she peeped at him.

"Chris!"

"Yes."

"May I see?"

"See what?"

"The hair!"

"It's just a hair, darling—a poor thing, but mine own."

She laughed and persisted.

"May I see it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well, darling, if you must ravish me—well, you must!"

She tugged his chin round and kissed him, and put a spoonful of peaches and cream in his mouth. Then, stealthily, she moved her hand to his shoulder and undid the button of the strap.

She paused and coloured, and kissed him, and murmured:

"Don't look at me like that, Chris."

"I was only trying to look virginal."

"It doesn't suit you, sweetheart!"

Stealthily, her hand moved to his shoulder again, and he sat in the cool shadow, the young torso white against the black rock.

"Oh, Chris . . . I . . . wish I had your skin!"

And suddenly she bent her head and kissed the cool flesh, and blushed furiously, and tugged at the costume and pulled it up over his shoulders again.

"Chris . . . am I . . . very awful?"

He did not answer for a moment or two, but sat staring out beyond the shadow of the rock, across the yellow sand to the blue of the sea. Mechanically, his fingers felt for the two small buttons on his shoulder.

She touched his cheek with her lips.

"Am I . . . Chris?"

He laughed.

"Of course not, Babe. I believe . . . that . . . that's natural between men and women . . . and it's only the moralists who pretend that women . . . are so different from men."

She drew up her legs and rested her chin in the little hollow between her knees.

"I wasn't a bit like this till I met you, Chris . . . I wasn't, really. Men used to irritate me rather—they always wanted to touch me, and I didn't want to be touched then, and now—oh, I don't know . . . but I . . . I always want you to be touching me."

She jumped up and ran to the basket, and brought back the thermos flask.

"Coffee, darling?"

He nodded.

"Of course, our attitude to sex is all wrong, Babe," he said thoughtfully. "I mean, the modern view is just as silly as the Victorian. The Victorians made sex a vice, and we make it a virtue—and it's neither. It's just joy—the most intense joy in all the world."

She sipped her cup and set it down, and slipped her hands between her brown legs and stared at the sand and the sea.

"Don't you like the moderns then, Chris?"

"Yes, but they're all out of focus. I tried to show what I meant in that article on Indiscipline I sent to Clym. They are as conventional as anyone, only their convention is inverted. It's really spontaneity that's missing in the moderns. Their sex is as much a tyranny as the Victorians' repression. They don't indulge because it's wonderful and sweet—but because it's the correct thing to do—and that's only inverted prudery. There's no joy in their contact, no

love of the body, no abandonment. It's social conformity, with them, to be sinful, as it was with the Victorians to be righteous. And sex is more than that. It's just complete perfection for one instant; complete union—senses, mind, body and soul—the one and only perfection in this imperfect world."

She glanced obliquely at him. He was staring out to sea, his face in profile against the swart rock.

"They're afraid of themselves," he went on. "And that's the worst form of cowardice. They're frightened of sex, because it's stronger than they are; and they're afraid of losing their identity by merging it with another. But they're wrong. It is the senses that teach us everything. The mind is nothing till it's been fed by the senses—it's just a recording machine with nothing to record. It's what we see and hear and touch and taste that feed the mind and give it work to do. We've got to lose ourselves to find ourselves, and they're afraid to lose themselves. But I want to lose myself—in the sea, and in the sun, and in the wind, and in all beautiful things, and . . . in you, darling."

He caught her in his arms and drew her down upon the sand, and leaned over her and kissed her, and their limbs mingled.

And then he was on his feet again, and running down to the sea. Dizzily, she sat up, her cheeks burning, the dark hair tangled with sand; like a little slim water-sprite he was dancing in the shallow waves, and all about his bare limbs the glistening drops sparkled in the sunlight.

She sat watching him, her lips trembling, a faint droop at the corners of the pretty mouth. And then she smiled, and jumping up, ran and joined him in the shallow waves.

Laughing, he caught her round the waist and drew her with him, deeper, till the sea hid all but their two faces—

hot faces, that smiled a little shyly. A wave rolled in and smothered them, and they came to the surface laughing and coughing.

Lazily she moved, and floated upon her back, the small breasts divided by a little trickle of water, as the swell of the sea lifted her and laid her gently down again. A yard from her lay Chris, blue eyes staring up at the blue sky.

"Cool, darling?" he murmured.

"Ever so cool, darling."

"Good!—we'll finish our lunch."

She laughed softly, and turning on her side, followed him.

They had each another cup of coffee, and then they packed away the lunch and lay on the sand, for the sun to dry them.

"I'll be asleep soon, Chris."

He sat up.

"We haven't seen the seals yet."

She sighed.

"Must one see the seals?"

He laughed, and jumping up, left her to her thoughts.

She lay supine, drinking in the sun, somnolent, sensuously happy.

Presently he came back, holding a long stick in his hand. She sat up, blinking.

"What are you going to do, Chris darling?"

He smiled.

"Lie down and fold your arms behind your head."

She obeyed, the black eyes wandering.

He took the stick and drew the line of her body in the sand, following each curve and hollow. She lay watching him, a smile on her lips, till he threw the stick away and called:

"Look!"

She sprang up and took his arm, and together they looked at the outline in the sand.

"I think I'm rather a nice shape, don't you, Chris?"

"Come and see the seals," said Chris.

III

They launched the boat and Chris took his seat in the stern. She raised her eyebrows.

"Who's going to row, darling?"

"You are—those bracelets suggested the idea. The slave always rows, darling."

"I see," she said meekly, and slipped the oars into the thole-pins.

Chris lit a cigarette, and for a while there was silence save for the creak of the oars and the sleepy sighing of the sea.

She pouted, and rested her arms on the oars.

"Must we see the seals, darling?"

"Is there anything else we can see?"

The black eyes blinked, and she rested her cheek on her arms.

"What do you want to see?"

"Well you see, darling—your clothing is not quite in period—slaves don't wear bathing costumes."

"Don't they?"

"Well, my slaves wouldn't!"

"Would your slaves wear anything?"

"Ear-rings, darling."

She raised her head and rested her chin between her hands as they held the oars.

"Your moods don't last long, do they, Chris?"

He blew out a cloud of smoke and stared up at the sky.

"Nothing lasts long—so why should moods?"

She sighed faintly, but he heard it, and in a flash had left

his seat and was kneeling, his arms round her slim hips, his chin resting in the hollow of her brown legs, the blue eyes looking up at her whimsically worshipful.

She laughed and drew in the oars, and raised his face and kissed him. And then she was picked up bodily and set down again upon cushions, and the sea vanished, and her horizon was limited to the rough white planks of the boat.

"Chris darling . . . supposing anyone is . . . is on the top of the cliff."

There was no answer, only the click of the catch of the little green sunshade, and a green shadow fell across her face.

The boat drifted on, unpiloted, a small white derelict upon a sea all blue, with a little green sunshade as sail.

"Chris darling . . . oh, Chris!"

The sea slid into dark caves and boomed faintly and gushed out again in showers of iridescent spray.

It was the day's plenilune. Shadows were short, sharp-edged and black; the sea, molten; the sand hidden by a shimmering veil of silver gauze. A bee droned, and the little black velvet body caught the sunshine as it passed, laden with the spoils of the gorse blossoms that splashed with yellow the turfey declivities of Tregasket Cap. A breath of wind came down from the cliff top, and the scent of the gorse mingled with the salt breath of the sea. All summer burned and throbbed within the sheltered cove.

The boat dipped her gunwale and righted herself again; the oars splashed into the sea, and her head came round.

From behind the green sunshade, a little voice murmured forlornly:

"Why, darling?"

"We were drifting, Babe."

The oars creaked and the boat moved slowly, and again the voice murmured:

"Chris . . . can you do up the buttons on my shoulder? . . . my fingers are shaky."

The oars clattered upon the thwarts, and the boat dipped her gunwale again. Then the little green sunshade folded up, and black eyes looked into blue.

"Thank you, darling."

A long green wave rolled into the cove, and the boat rose up and slipped down into a deep translucent hollow.

A pair of small yellow butterflies fluttered about the bows, rising and falling ecstatically, one above and one below, and neither ever far apart.

"Pretty things!" she murmured dreamily.

He nodded, his arm about her shoulder.

"Lady and Gentleman Butterfly, Babe."

"How do you know?"

"Because they keep so close together."

The erratic flight brought the butterflies above the middle thwart.

"Is he making love to her, Chris?"

The little yellow shapes dipped and settled, vibrant in the brilliant sunlight.

"Yes," said Chris.

And the second of vibrant ecstasy passed, and the little yellow wings were fluttering away over the blue of the sea.

A faint sigh sounded.

"I wish we were butterflies, Chris."

IV

In the stern sat Babe. It was a wide, deep seat, and she had piled the cushions upon it and sat cross-legged, the sunshade resting on one shoulder, the diffused green light shining through upon her brown arms.

"Chris," she said suddenly, "there's something very

important I want to ask you—only—well, you mustn't laugh at me or tease me if I ask—promise?"

"Swear, darling."

She laughed, and hesitated. Her eyes were downcast and the black lashes threw a shadow upon the cheeks.

"Chris—what I wanted to ask was—I mean—am I . . . am I white enough—my skin, I mean . . . it . . . it isn't too dusky?"

She raised her eyes as she finished, and looked at him, but he was looking over the side of the boat, the oars suspended, the muscles of the brown arms taut and rigid.

"You're absolutely wonderful naked, Babe," he said thoughtfully.

"Naked, darling?—why . . . you've only seen . . . little bits of me."

He turned his head and laughed softly.

"I've seen you from head to toe, in your bedroom at Okebourne, that night I climbed up to you . . . you were lying on your tummy, reading."

"Oh, Chris!"

There was a faint reproach in the voice, but there was none in the face, only a slight trace of shyness in the uncertain movement of the lips and in the lowering of the long black lashes.

"I didn't try to see you, Babe, honest . . . I just climbed up thinking you'd be in bed, and as soon as I saw you—I ran away."

He finished sheepishly, and scrambled over the seats and sat beside her.

And then he tried to explain all that he had felt that moonlight night, when he had seen her lying in the star-dust of the Milky Way.

She listened, not looking at him, her lips parted, and now and again she nodded and smiled, and in the end she took his face between her hands and kissed him.

"It must have been very wonderful, Chris boy," she said softly.

They had been given directions by old Tremelet, how best to see the seals. He had described the cave, and the precautions to be taken. The most important precaution they had forgotten. At low tide the cave was dry and the seals gone.

They remembered it now, as they neared the cliff and saw a narrow strip of yellow sand between them and the dark mouth of the cave.

"There, darling!" exclaimed Babe. "There ain't going to be no seals."

"What about being Troglodytes?"

"Of course, darling—what are they?"

"They're not butterflies."

"Oh!"

"Don't sound so bored. Troglodytes are cave-dwellers. Come with me and I'll be a cave-man."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, darling—a promise."

The boat's nose grounded, and they jumped ashore. The black mouth of the cave yawned at them, and a faint sighing came from the darkness.

They vanished, but a moment or two later Chris re-appeared. Running down to the boat, he dragged out the anchor and dug it firmly in the sand.

When he re-entered the cave, she had disappeared. He called her name, and his voice broke into a hundred echoes that came back sighing—"Babe, Babe, Babe." And as the whispers died away his own name came echoing from the darkness ahead.

"Chris darling—quick—it's absolutely wonderful!"

He hurried towards the darkness. The wet black tunnel narrowed and bent sharply, and the darkness vanished.

He stopped short and caught his breath in sheer wonderment. For the black tunnel ceased abruptly, and he stood in a vast vaulted cavern, tinged with a faint, suffused glow of green. A fault in the stratification of the rocks had imposed a mass of limestone upon the shale, and where the cleavage showed, a rift ran up and outward to the light, and through the rift came a faint glow, that caught the veins of copper in the limestone and filled the whole cavern with a tinge of elfish green.

But it was none of these wonders that held him spellbound, but a greater—for just beneath the rift was a great round basin of polished limestone, shaped like a mighty shell, iridescent with copper veinings, and filled to the brim with ice-green water, as placid and smooth as ice.

With one foot upon the brim of the basin stood Babe, her slim body shining in wavering bands of greenish light. And as he watched her, she put out her arms to balance her body, and dipped one foot in the pool, and the glassy surface broke and pulsed, and a thousand points of flickering light danced upon the moist walls of the cave and set alight a thousand twinkling points of quartz, till the whole cavern pulsed with a thousand tiny stars.

He ran to her and caught her hands, and she turned and smiled, and their faces glowed and paled in the wavering bands of greenish light. Neither spoke, but stood together, peeping down at the great basin of ice-green water.

"Chris!" The whisper was magnified, and went sighing away into the darkness beyond where water fell softly with little hollow gurglings.

"It's as clear as crystal, and there's sand on the bottom—you kneel and look."

They knelt and peered down into the wavering green, and saw the faint gold of sand, pitted with little white shells.

And suddenly she moved, and sidled over the brim, and

slipped down into the green pool, and the water broke into a thousand flashing facets, and the dark wall of the cave shot points of fire into the green twilight.

"I can touch bottom," she whispered, looking up at him, her head back, the water lapping her throat, her eyes alight, her lips smiling. He slipped down upon his knees.

"Babe!" His hands moved, and he held her face, and bent lower and whispered.

"Oh, Chris!"

"Please, Babe—you must . . . it is the one thing needed to . . . complete all."

She gave a little shiver and nodded, and the movement set the water dancing, and the bright light dazzled him, so that he turned away. There was a moment's silence, and the cave whispered, in elfish echo, the one word:

"Chris!"

He turned sharply, and fell upon his knees. Upon the green water a face floated, upturned to his, pale as a lotus blossom upon the bosom of a shaded pool. Beneath was the dim outline of pale shoulders and small pale breasts, that moved languidly as the water moved, misty—intangible—like the pale shape of a mermaid in a sea all green.

The shadowy arms wavered and broke the surface, and emerged, firm and round and polished, with small, cool hands that touched his face and drew him down to meet the lips upturned to his.

He touched her wrists, and his hands slid down her arms and into the cold water, and wandered over the smooth shoulders and little cool breasts, and she sighed softly, and the sigh fluttered away into the whispering blackness beyond.

There was no word spoken, no supplication, no protest, no consent—only an impulse shared, and she was in his arms, dripping wet and shining, as he carried her away from the cool green twilight, towards the sun.

And at the cave's mouth she lay, like a fallen statue, upon the yellow sand.

"Oh, Babe!"

There came a rushing sound, and a wave broke on the shallow strand, and a smother of milky foam swept in, streaming over the prone figures in little sprouting cascades, before it shrank away again, leaving them shuddering.

He stumbled to his knees, and swept the water from his eyes and stood up unsteadily.

"The tide has turned, Babe—run and fetch your costume."

Behind him he heard a tremulous sigh, but he stood immovable, staring at the sea. Then, running to the anchor, he seized the rope and drew the boat in. When he looked back, the mouth of the cave was empty.

V

In the shadow of the great rock, they sat and sipped tea soberly, and were very silent.

The tide was coming in fast, and about the boat's keel runnels of water were forming, and little waves of froth splashed the white timbers.

Tregasket Cap was in shadow now, and Poltire Point in light, and the heat-haze had vanished, and the gulls were awake and clamorous.

"Chris!"

"Yes."

"Are you sorry or glad . . . that . . . that the wave rolled in?"

He hesitated and sighed.

"Just now, I'm sorry—but—to-morrow, I expect I'll be glad."

She sat with knees drawn up and hands clasped beneath her thighs, and stared across the sand.

"Why?"

For quite a while he did not answer, but lay upon his side, smoking and drawing patterns in the sand with the blade of a knife.

"It's Clym, really," he said finally, "Clym and Elaine, and your father and mother."

"That's convention, isn't it?"

"No—they haven't told us not . . . not to be butterflies—they've just taken it for granted that . . . that we wouldn't let them down."

She rubbed her chin gently to and fro across her brown knees.

"It's got nothing to do with them, really, has it, Chris?"

"Nothing, really—only . . . you can't act ahead of the people you like . . . and if they're old-fashioned, well—we've just got to be old-fashioned too."

She sighed, and reaching for her bag began to comb her hair, knotted with salt and sand.

"And we—we've got to lose all the best years of our lives . . . waiting."

He looked up at her. She held the small tortoiseshell hair-slide between her lips.

"Babe—you're sorry then——?"

She paused and looked down at him, and her hands ceased their labours.

"Yes—now I am—later, I expect I'll be glad."

She leant towards him and looked into his eyes, and kissed him and smiled.

"And we have seen the seals, after all, Chris."

And after that they were happy again, and spent the evening wandering about the shore, examining the pools in the rocks till the cove was half in shadow and the voice of the sea was louder, and the boat floated and drifted nearer to the buried anchor.

They had named no time for supper, and lingered,

reluctant to leave the sweet solitude of the cove. But the air was growing cooler and a faint breeze had come up, and the sun was throwing a shadow of Tregasket Cap across the V-shaped ravine where the jet of water spouted clear. The cascade had changed from silver to gold.

A long wave rolled into the cove and broke, sliding up the sand and lapping the base of the great rock that had sheltered them from the noonday heat. The water splashed their feet and shrank away again, leaving the sand shining.

"Oh, Chris—it's nearly gone!"

She pointed tragically. Barely visible was the outline of her lissom body that he had marked so clearly in the noonday sun.

He touched her hand and she looked up at him, and the big black eyes were brimming with tears.

"Let's go, Chris. I—I feel miserable. The sun has gone . . . and I am cold."

He ran to the boat and fetched her sweater, and made her put it on over her costume, and the old school blazer over both.

"And put mine round your legs, darling. I'll row—that'll keep me warm."

She nodded, and let him lead her to the boat.

The waves were crimsoning, and the towering cliffs were black against the sky. Like a great wall, the shadow of Tregasket Cap cut the cove in twain. The line of foam at the cliff base was faint and ghostly, and all the cove was disconsolate with the sighing of the sea.

He rowed steadily. She sat huddled up—the white sweater tucked round her legs. The green sunshade was folded across her knees.

They were out beyond Poltore Point now, and over the fading sea the bright white eye of the lighthouse blinked at the setting sun.

"Look round, Babe—it's good-bye to Tregasket."

She turned and looked back along the faint wake of the boat, into a region of deep black shadows. And turning her head again, she sighed.

"I wonder where those two little butterflies are now, Chris."

"Fast asleep, darling, like we'll be soon."

"Yes, but they'll sleep together—and we'll sleep alone."

He peered through the dusk at the little shrouded face.

"We're only twenty-one, Babe."

"Oh, I know!—but at twenty-one—I want the Moon."

"And there it is, darling!"

And there it was—a slender silver sickle, poised in the darkling sky above the black immensity of Poltire Point.

She laughed, and jumped to her feet.

"Oh!—it's the new moon, Chris boy, and that means luck. Touch gold, and bow, and wish, darling!"

He touched the gold of her bracelet and she touched too, and their fingers met, and they bowed three times and she raised her eyes and called her wish aloud:

"Oh, please, Moon, let us be butterflies soon!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

THE station for Poltore was at Castleton, a small market town, twenty miles away. A crazy Ford van ran between the two places to serve visitors, but the four agreed that in common decency Clym must be allowed the use of his own car for the journey.

"Are you going like that?" said Bill doubtfully, looking at the stained bathing-dresses.

"Of course," replied Babe.

"Put your bracelets on, darling," said Chris. "It's chilly motoring."

They arrived ten minutes before the train, and Chris and Babe spent the interval playing leapfrog over some milk churns. Bill and Tiny disowned them by going to the buffet for a cup of tea.

As the time of arrival drew near, they reunited, and stood with arms linked, and stared down the long shimmering line, to where the black mouth of a tunnel opened beneath the swart contours of Roughter Moor.

The black mouth of the tunnel spouted out a plume of white smoke, and a little toy train appeared. It seemed to be motionless, but it grew in size, and the four began to oscillate excitedly. Now it was audible, puffing purposefully. The station was agog and the voice of a porter was calling in good Cornish the names of good Cornish places.

The engine drew abreast of the ramp and a head appeared,

and a waving arm—an arm of prodigious length that nearly decapitated the station-master.

“Clym!” they all shouted, and the train drew up.

Clym alighted, unperturbed, arm under arm.

“Oh, Clym darling!” cried Tiny, and embraced him shamelessly.

And then another figure appeared.

“Elaine darling!” cried Chris, and embraced her more shamelessly than Tiny had Clym.

Clym raised an admonitory hand.

“Control your reflexes, please,” he said, and then for the first time he noticed the bathing costumes, and the black eyebrows rose.

“Who are these people, Elaine?”

“Hangers on,” said Tiny. “We found ’em in the village.”

“Elaine!” pleaded Chris.

“I think you look sweet, Chris,” said Elaine soothingly.

“That’s only because he’s kissed you,” said Bill.

Elaine turned up her nose.

“It’s not the first time—is it, Chris?”

“Nor the last!” answered Chris.

“’Oi!” said Babe, and caught hold of his ear.

“We’ve got the Austin,” broke in Tiny, “and it holds six comfortably, including knee-seats.”

“Poor little Austin!” murmured Clym.

But it rose to the occasion magnificently, expectorated defiantly in the face of a porter, and roared away, Clym driving, Elaine beside him, Chris and Babe perched insecurely on the folds of the hood.

“Time we came!” muttered Clym to Elaine.

They had engaged a woman from the village to get tea ready, and when they arrived it was to find perfection spread upon a snow-white cloth. Clym ate cream till his speech

thickened, and Babe spilt her tea and screamed for assistance. Chris rendered first-aid in the kitchen. Tiny's cup stuck to her fingers and then dropped and broke, and Bill ate radishes with a fish fork.

"What a perfectly disgusting household!" said Elaine.

"Never mind, Elaine dearest," purred Tiny, "Bill and I are getting married on New Year's Day, and we shall have a respectable home for you to come to."

And that began explanations about Bill's salary and Uncle Joe's letter.

Chris added the details about his non-success at Batten & Trench's.

"Never mind, Chris," said Elaine, "you'll be all right."

"There is later news *re* Chris," said Clym nonchalantly

Four pairs of eyes all stared at Clym.

He felt in his pocket and took out a letter.

"From *The Moderate*. They were going to post it, but I told them as I was seeing you I'd deliver it."

Chris put out his hand unsteadily.

"*The Moderate*," he muttered, and fumbled with the envelope.

"Open it, for God's sake, darling!" panted Babe.

He opened it.

A letter fell out, and out of the letter, a cheque.

There was a general scramble, and the milk was upset. Babe emerged from the scrum triumphant. Clym was mopping his trouser-leg patiently.

"Three guineas, Chris!—oh!—and oh, Chris darling—with the Editor's compliments, and . . . and proofs follow!"

Chris stared stupidly at the spilt milk.

"Er—what's it all mean, Clym?"

"The article on Indiscipline has been accepted. It appears in the 1st July issue."

Chris still stared at the spilt milk. Suddenly he looked up.

"Then . . . I'm not . . . quite a washout . . . am I!"

"Chris, darling——!"

There was a faint tremor in Babe's voice, and she scrambled out of her chair and hid him from view.

An excited babble had broken out.

"Chris darling," she whispered, "I knew—I did—I knew, I knew, I knew!"

"What, darling?"

"That . . . that you'd write, one day."

She dropped a tiny tear on his cheek and brushed it away with her lips, and laughed, and turned and beat on the table with her hands, and yelled defiantly:

"My Chris—will beat you all—yet—you see!"

Chris laughed.

"I say, Clym—it's most awfully decent of you to get them to take it."

Clym blew a thin jet of smoke towards the ceiling.

"I did nothing, Peter Pan. I was pretty sure I need do nothing when I'd read it, so I just put it in an envelope, with a card of yours, and it was accepted—on its own merits."

Tiny jumped up.

"Clym—darling—well, you're the only one in the world like you, Clym!"

Chris laughed jerkily.

"That was a pretty good bit of work on your part, Clym, and . . . what about a spot of 'alc'?"

"What goes well with cream?" said Clym.

"Peaches," murmured Chris, and took Babe on his knee.

But, later, she took him on one side.

"You go down to the Poltire Arms with Clym, darling—just you two—you've earned it—and . . . oh, I don't mind what you do, because you're a sweet, clever darling!"

He tilted her chin and kissed her.

"And you're—well, never mind what you are, darling—I know what we'll both be before very long."

"What, darling?"

"Butterflies!"

"Please, darling!"

II

At six o'clock, Chris and Clym went down to the village. It was a radiant evening, with a pleasant breeze from the sea, and big waves rolling into the cove.

"I say, Clym—can you cash that cheque?"

"As bad as all that?"

"Well—not quite, but I want to buy a few things."

Three notes and three shillings passed into Chris's hands, the cheque into Clym's. Chris vanished into a shop. It was a little, mixed shop, and called itself "The Poltire Emporium." It sold picture postcards, Cornish cream, pants, socks and neckties, and Serpentine Ware in the shape of small cottages, lighthouses, inkstands, and trinket cases. The Serpentine Ware was expensive, but that didn't worry Chris now. It had worried him before, because they had all looked in the windows and wanted different pieces, and sighed reluctantly and abandoned hope.

Tiny had wanted a trinket case, Bill an inkstand, and Babe a lighthouse with a hole in the top to take a night-light, which, when lit, shone realistically through a mica window.

Now he had earned three guineas, so he bought them all, and then felt that wasn't enough. So he bought a powder pot for Elaine and an ash tray for Clym. And then he remembered Mr. and Mrs. Goolan, and bought Mr. Goolan a pot for studs and links, and Mrs. Goolan a little Serpentine tree, with branches to hang rings on. The last two he had

packed there and then, and scribbled on a visiting card—"In gratitude for being the parents of Babe and Bill, from Tiny and Chris"—and walked out with a parcel under each arm.

"Pants or cream?" queried Clym.

"Serpents," answered Chris, and led the way to the post office.

It was six-thirty when they entered the bar of the Poltire Arms. It was early for the habitués, and they had the room to themselves. Clym sat on the window-seat, and Chris on top of a big barrel standing between the bar counter and the window. It was his favourite seat, for it gave him a view of the cove without taking him out of reach of the bar counter.

He had discarded his hat, and was still in his bathing costume, and sat with legs crossed, tapping the staves of the barrel with his white sandshoes.

"My shout this evening, Clym—have anything you like, from Imperial Tokay to 'swipes.'"

Clym turned his head.

"How much have you got left of those three guineas?"

"Oh, tons!"

"Good—I'll have two ounces of beer."

Chris chuckled.

"Beer's too plebeian for an author," he said, and leaning sideways, added in a whisper, "Ever tried old Tremelet's contraband Madeira?"

Clym raised one eyebrow.

"Do you mean the casks that came ashore from the wreck?"

Chris nodded.

Clym stroked his chin reflectively.

"It took me a whole month and cost me pounds in liquor to get that secret out of him. You have done it in a week. How?"

"I told him you were a friend of mine."

"Well I'm damned!"

"That's why we're friends. Madeira?"

"Well, perhaps a stoup before dinner."

"Two stoups," corrected Chris, and knocked on the counter.

Tremelet appeared and there was a whispered colloquy.

Chris smiled at Clym.

"The Nectar approacheth!"

"Thanks, Ganymede."

The Nectar arrived, a real amber wine in big dock glasses. They raised them, and both winked.

"Silenus!" said Chris.

"The youthful Dionysos!" murmured Clym.

"Liquid perfection!" sighed Chris, and set his glass down.

"Take charge of my cash, will you, Clym, I've got no pockets."

Clym took it and began counting it.

"Hi!"

Clym raised his eyebrows.

"You've blown half that money, Dionysos. Is it any use my suggesting moderation?"

"Not the slightest! I'm the author of an article on Indiscipline. Chin-chin!"

Clym sighed.

"Chin-chin," he echoed, and set his glass down.

"Shall we stoup again?" suggested Chris.

"I think so—but it's my turn."

"Pardon me—I stoup to conquer."

Clym coughed deprecatingly.

"To conquer whom?"

"You! I'm an author and twenty-one years old—Clym, you've got to treat me as a man."

"Certainly, Puck—I'll treat you as a man—Tremelet! Two more stoups."

They arrived. Chris beat on the barrel with his heels.

"Now then, Clym—honest! Was that article accepted on its merits?"

"Absolutely!—and, Chris, it is damn good—original, witty, penetrating, and excellently written."

A faint flush came up in Chris's cheeks.

"You mean it, Clym?"

"Honest!"

Chris sighed thankfully.

"Tremelet! Two more stoups."

"Excuse me——!"

"Too late."

He handed him a third glass and laughed happily. His cheeks were a little warmer than usual, his eyes more blue. Through the open window a sunbeam striped the floor and danced upon the strong brown thighs.

"I've learned the secret of happiness, Clym," he said eagerly.

"Madeira?"

"Well, Madeira comes into it, and so do you, and all of them—Elaine, and your father and mother, and Tiny and Bill."

"And Babe?"

Chris smiled, drank off his glass and ordered two more.

"Babe's me," he said, smiling over the brim. "A female me—we're twin souls—affinities—the world's ours—we've bought it. You can have a bit too, but it's ours."

"I see. Well, if it's yours—burn it, or lose it—it's not worth much."

"Don't you believe it! That's my secret—the secret of happiness. Don't try to stop the world rolling—it's drunk, so it's bound to roll. Let it. And take a yard

measure and measure off as much as you want of it, and let the rest go on rolling."

Clym stared out of the window at the sea, sweeping into the cove in long, translucent lines, capped with a fringe of blown spray.

"You missed 1914, Puck."

"And you missed 1918—missed it hopelessly. There were six million of you, young men, organized and trained. For four years you'd kept together, sweated, sworn, and died together, for something you called 'Civilization.' For the first time, old men had to stand aside—dying was a young man's job. And then, when it was over, you just melted away, forgot your regiments, your swearing and your sweating, your disillusionment and your disgust; and back came the greybeards and said that living was an old man's job, and you let them undo everything that you'd done, take you out of regiments and put you back into classes again, and divide you, and rule you, and give you medals instead of justice, and leave you, broken, to throw up here and there a novelist or a poet to show us what you'd been through."

Clym smiled grimly.

"And you care, don't you—what we went through?"

"Why should we, Clym? You never cared yourselves, once it was over."

"True—well, let's have the secret of happiness."

"Ah! Happiness is refusing to think in any terms larger than a few square miles of earth and a half-dozen people that matter. It's the only possible way to live to-day. One simply can't take the world seriously. Commerce has got it by the throat and is slowly strangling it. It's regimenting everyone—giving them the same jobs, the same salaries, the same houses, the same pleasures, the same prejudices, and the same tastes. And Life is diversity, not similarity—it's the clash of opinions, tastes, and interests, not their welding into

one dead level of universal conformity. And I won't conform—nor will Babe—and we're not going to spend our lives moaning because civilization is a sort of opera-bouffe with all the old men standing in the wings to prompt us when we forget our lines. We've taken our yard-measure and ruled out of ken politics, economics, international affairs, social reform, industrial dog-fights, newspapers, religion and science—everything that the old men love to peddle in and preach about—and we've got a world the old men can't enter, because of their asthma and their rheumatism, and their impotence which they call their 'decency.' ”

He paused, out of breath. Clym was slightly out of focus.

“ What about another stoup? ”

“ The first four seem to have been quite effective,” murmured Clym.

“ Two more stoups, Tremelet! ”

“ The last! ” said Clym firmly.

They drank again. Clym was still sitting at the window, but a more nebulous Clym was sitting just outside.

“ You shee, Clym—— ” began Chris.

“ The ‘ h ’ in ‘ see ’ is silent.”

“ Quite—but, Clym—I will write one day, won't you? ”

“ Quite! ” said Clym.

“ Eh? ”

“ Come along, Puck, or you'll stoup to rise no more.”

Chris slid off the barrel, stood up, and genuflected.

“ My legsh have lost their cunning, Clym.”

“ Oh yes, Puck? ”

“ Oh, yesh—but Clym, when I get back to London—this time—er—next time—I mean, thish time—— ”

“ Next time, some year, never! ”

“ 'Xactly—can I see you now and again?—I mean, I'm really much older than I was—— ” He put his hand to his

lips—"er—excuse me, Clym—as I was saying, weren't you, when I get back, I'm much older—I've got a perfectly good hair, right in the middle of my chest."

"Uncoil it, will you?—and I'll lead you home by it."

Chris giggled, and became very earnest again.

"But I mean it, Clym, about seeing you—just the two of us—a bachelor evening, what?"

"When winter comes," said Clym.

Chris sat down abruptly.

"Winter? Who caresadam about winter?—'s summer now——" He raised his hand to his mouth again—"Pologies, Clym."

III

On the way out, they passed a big four-wheeled bath-chair, bought by old Tremelet for the use of his mother, now no longer in need of travelling facilities. It was drawn by Tremelet's donkey. Chris eyed it thoughtfully, and suddenly laughed.

"I feel very old, Clym, and the cliffsh are steep."

"According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, the 'x' in 'cliffs' is archaic."

"Archa—hic—pardon, Clym. Tremelet!"

Clym did his best, but it was useless. Chris had set his heart on the bath-chair and the donkey. Tremelet had an earnest colloquy with Clym, and the donkey appeared.

"Muleteer!" murmured Chris.

"Sir!" said Clym.

Chris sat down abruptly in the bath-chair. Earnestly he stared at the sky, and from the sky to the sea.

"'The shea and the shky, and the shky and the shea——' No—'The shky and the shea, and the shea and the shky, Lay like a load on my weary eye.' Coleridge, Clym,

'Ainshant Sailor—Mariner'—you know—fellows who shail the wintry sea—with li'l daughter."

He dozed, and the donkey was harnessed. The sound disturbed him, and he opened his eyes sleepily.

"Donkey, donkey, donkey," he piped coaxingly. The donkey whisked his tail. Tremelet raised his eyes to heaven.

"Quite," said Clym. "Leave him to me."

Tremelet vanished.

"Donkey, donkey, donkey," piped Chris again. He leaned forward.

"Clym—find his accelerator—I—I think—it's—it's—thish end."

Clym put up the hood of the bath-chair, and Chris vanished, except for a pair of brown legs.

"Gee up!" said Clym, taking hold of the reins.

Chris leaned forward.

"That's wrong, Clym—it'sh not a gee-gee, so it can't gee up. It's only a donkey, so shay 'donkey-up,' donkey, donkey, donkey-up!"

Clym sighed hopelessly.

"Move, for God's sake!" he whispered in the donkey's ear.

The donkey moved. From inside the hood, a voice was singing the hymn tune—"The Church's One Foundation":

*"She wears her shilk pyjamas in shummer when it's hot,
She wears her flannel nightie—in winter, when—it's not;
And shometimes in the shpring-time—and . . . shometimes
in the fall,
She gets between the sheeties—with—nothing on—at . . .
all."*

The wheels crunched over the gravel surface of the road, the donkey plodded, Clym walked thoughtfully. From

within the hood came the sound of deep breathing. Clym raised his eyes thankfully.

Just short of the cottage, the bath-chair came to a halt. Clym glanced inside anxiously. Chris was fast asleep. Very carefully, he lifted out the parcels and tiptoed round to the front door. Everyone rushed to meet him.

"Where's Chris?" they all cried.

"He won't be long," said Clym hurriedly, and managed to shepherd them all inside.

"As a matter of fact——" he put down the parcels.

"Yes?" said Babe.

"Clym," said Elaine, "have you been letting him drink too much?"

"Yes," said Clym.

"But where is he?" exclaimed Babe.

"In a bath-chair, outside."

They all stood up, but she waved them back.

"Eat your supper," she said, and ran out of the house.

Five minutes passed, and she did not return.

"It's too bad of you, Clym," said Elaine. "He's only a baby."

She left the room hurriedly. Passing through the cottage gate, she saw the bath-chair. It was empty. She looked round her, and set off walking towards a clump of gorse bushes, some way from the cottage. As she left the road and took to the turf, she moved cautiously. The bushes were high, and she approached on tiptoe and peeped over.

On his side lay Chris, fast asleep. The cheeks were slightly flushed, and his face rested in the hollow of his arm. The gorse moved in the breeze, throwing little shadows upon his face. In the stillness there came the humming of bees. A single yellow blossom had fallen and hung in the curly hair.

Beside him knelt Babe, sitting back on her heels, her hands resting lightly on the brown thighs. She was looking

down at the sleeping face, the black eyes intent, the lips faintly pouting. And suddenly she bent down and kissed the flushed face very softly, and drew back again, and the pout vanished in a little smile.

And suddenly she caught sight of Elaine, and blushed and hesitated. Finally she jumped up and tiptoed to her.

"There's nothing really wrong, Elaine. He—he talked to me quite all right, and . . . he's only very sleepy . . . so I let him sleep. He . . . he's only just a little bee that's had too much honey."

A faint smile moved Elaine's lips, and she kissed her impulsively.

"You stay with him, dear, and I'll run and fetch a rug to put over him."

"Thanks. And—Elaine—there's a parcel full of things . . . for us . . . he said so. Open it, and give the others theirs."

Five minutes later she lay down beside him and drew the rug over both. It was dusk when he woke to find her arms about him.

"Better, Chris boy?"

He sat up and looked at her, and blinked owlshly.

"You still here, darling?"

"Of course."

"Babe—I never want any more 'alc' as long as I live." She laughed softly and kissed him.

"Of course not, darling."

"It wasn't Clym's fault. I just forgot everything, because—well—because I was so marvellously happy."

He leaned against her shoulder.

"Oh, Babe—my head does ache!"

"Of course it does, darling. Come along—I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

He stood up, and passed his hand over his forehead, and shivered.

"I feel stale, and cold, and cheap, Babe."

She slipped her arm round him and drew the rug over their shoulders, and they walked back together, and the warmth of her body warmed his.

The cottage was empty, and she took him up to his room, and then ran downstairs again. On the sitting-room table stood the Serpentine lighthouse. She smiled softly and, running into the kitchen, put the kettle on. Then she found a candle and cut it short, and ran back again and put it in the top of the little lighthouse.

When the tea was ready, she lit the candle and stood the lighthouse on the tray, and went upstairs.

Chris was on the bed, lying back against his pillow, watching night come over the sea. She set the lighthouse on the dressing-table, and the little beam cast a faint circle upon the ceiling and a wan glow across the bed, just lighting their two faces as she sat beside him, her cheek against his.

"You are a darling," he murmured.

"And so are you, darling."

He sipped his tea gratefully, and she sipped too, from the same cup. And the little lighthouse shone bravely.

Suddenly he laughed.

"Doesn't it look ripping, Babe?"

She kissed his eyes and laughed too.

"You great kid, Chris, and you go drinking with grown-up men!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHRIS woke with a start. The bedroom was in darkness, save for a blurred square that faced him as he lay on his side. It couldn't possibly be seven o'clock, he told himself, knowing perfectly well that it could quite easily be, and probably was. His eyelids flickered and closed. All his senses yearned for the sweet oblivion that was creeping over him. He was warm, deliciously comfortable, sensuously tired, conscious enough to taste faintly the luxury of unconsciousness.

He opened his eyes again. It was almost pain—that conflict between the body's supplication and the will's command. He sat up. The room felt bitterly cold. The blurred square loomed out of the darkness, a pitiless reminder that the frozen world was waking and that he must wake with it.

He got out of bed and groped his way to the switch. The light flashed on and showed the room, tinged with a faint white mist that drifted in stealthily through the lowered pane of the window.

He slipped on his dressing-gown and walked to the window. The glass was covered with exquisite patterns of frozen fern fronds. He pursed his lips and breathed, and the fronds lost their whiteness, trickled and vanished, leaving a little round hole. But he could see nothing save a sea of impalpable whiteness, wavering faintly in the jet of light that spouted out through the hole in the icy fernery.

He went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. The

clock on the mantelpiece registered seven-fifteen. Against the wall hung a tradesman's calendar. Tuesday, the 30th December. In two days' time, Tiny would be married.

He washed in ice-cold water. There were no geysers or new-fashioned boilers in the flats, and the miniature kitchenette ate a bucket of coal cheerfully without passing its warm emotions on to the miniature cistern above the bath. He did not bother to shave. It was the only advantage he had ever gained from his youthful chin and upper lip. In winter, he could neglect the adult ritual for two days without any visible alteration in his appearance.

He poured out two cups of tea, but Tiny was fast asleep. The curly head shone against the white pillow, the cheeks were aglow, the little lips just parted. He switched out the light and left her to her dreams. What was the sense in making two people uncomfortable when only one need be? He didn't want any breakfast, anyway. A biscuit and an apple would see him through the morning. He ate both biscuit and apple, and drank both cups of tea. Then he lit a cigarette and went back to his room to dress.

He was beginning to hate the blue suit. It was shiny down the front, and there were holes in most of the pockets, holes that swallowed his fountain-pen and his keys, and everything that was his, and always arranged to swallow them at the moments they were most needed. The waistcoat hole usually swallowed his season ticket just as he reached the barrier, and the one in the coat his keys just as he got to his locker at Batten & Trench's. He had only reaped one advantage from the holes. Once he had found a sixpence in the lining of his coat just after he had dropped a shilling through the hole in his trousers. It had saved him considerable trouble, for it was his last shilling, and he had only discovered its loss just as he had finished a cup of coffee in a Lyons' dépôt.

It was a quarter to eight as he struggled into his overcoat and gloves. But it was eight o'clock before he got away. He had left his keys in the lining of his other coat and his season ticket in the lining of his other waistcoat. Then he couldn't find the book he was reading, and when he had found the book he had no matches and could not find the packet that was usually kept in the cupboard. Finally he felt something tapping against the seat of his trousers, and found that he hadn't lost the matchbox after all. It was safe in the lining, but it took him a few minutes to coax it round to the front, and another five to work it upwards to meet two cold fingers that lay in wait for it at the other entrance to his pocket.

In the street the cold was pitiless. He felt that the scientists were probably right in their theory that the world would ultimately lose all its heat and drift nonchalantly about the universe in frozen indifference to progress and the ascent of Man, and the League of Nations, and his articles in *The Moderate*.

Distance had shrunk to the measure of his arm's length. His eyes watered and his throat tickled with an incessant cough. His ears were numb, his breath panted out ahead of him and was caught up and absorbed by the icy vapour that wreathed about him and shut him off from all the world, within a little cell of white opacity.

It was a penny 'bus ride to Belgrave Station, and normally the journey took seven minutes, after allowing for unsuccessful efforts to board a succession of crowded 'buses.

Chris hated that scramble for the 'bus more than he hated most of the other conveniences of modern travel. It was an undignified, gregarious action, utterly destructive of manners and self-respect. There was usually a knot of people waiting with him, mostly girls with little attaché cases and anxious faces that grew more anxious as the juggernaut

roared down upon them. And always there was a big, stout, eupeptic man, who had never visualized any other occupant of the universe except himself. As the 'bus approached he would set his teeth, measure with one quick, cunning glance the position of the anxious-looking girls, and jump, swinging himself on to the footboard, already thronged with passengers waiting to alight, and hang on, leaning back with a dogged frown, while his massive body acted as a flail and whipped aside like chaff the anxious-looking girls. Then, when the gangway was clear, he would swing his great shoulders round, stamp into the 'bus and sit down with the aggressive satisfaction of one who has triumphed in the great struggle for existence which leads with syllogistic simplicity to the survival of the fittest.

Ordinarily, Chris never attempted to board a 'bus till this modern Raleigh had been accommodated, but this morning the fog and the cold gave him a zest for battle. Circumstances favoured him, for the fog had slowed the 'bus to half its normal speed. As it drew nearer, with the big man hanging doggedly to the back, Chris set his teeth. As it passed, he brought his elbow up with all his strength, and knew a wild joy as he felt the massive ribs quiver under the impact.

There was a hoarse—"Damnation!"—and the 'bus vanished into the fog ahead. Chris smiled happily and lit a cigarette.

But the tube station checked the evanescent emotion. It was packed with all its normal passengers, plus all those who normally used a 'bus. Chris was caught up in a panting mass of half-thawed bodies, turned completely round three times, and finished up with his nose pressing a newspaper against the nose of the man who was reading it. The porters exhorted everyone to "pass along," and, meeting with no encouragement, put their backs against those that

protruded beyond the level of the doors, and heaved nonchalantly. Chris felt his eyes bulging. It was the only part of him that could bulge. A girl, wedged against his shoulder, said "Oh!" faintly, as an elbow crushed her breasts. There was a metallic sliding sound, and the doors had closed; and the train started with another load to figure in the Company's statistics of the number of passengers carried during the course of a most successful business year.

The train bumped and rocked through the roaring tunnel, and a homogeneous mass of half-thawed bodies bumped and rocked as one, and the smoke of cigarettes and pipes grew thicker, and a crescendo of coughing broke out. And all grew warm and warmed the air with a faint humid staleness.

At Threadmorton Street Chris popped out, like a pip from a squeezed lemon. Unity Square was a polar solitude, with the silence shattered by the forlorn booming of ships' sirens from the fog-bound river. He entered the office with one minute to spare before the red line was ruled in the attendance register.

The fog was turning brown, the lights were on and the windows were opaque, each one a narrow plaque, reflecting a section of desks and green light-shades. Everyone was coughing and grumbling. Mr. Turnbull's nose was shading from red to blue. He wore a pair of red mittens, and blew wheezingly at a row of knotted and veined old fingers, too numb to do their duty by Batten & Trench.

Ffolliott was sitting morosely on his stool, his hands in his pockets, his eyes glowering at the brown murk that surged against the windows. Ginn was wheezing himself red in the face.

"Asthma, or croup, friend," he muttered between the spasms. "Shan't last the winter through. Bad day for the publicans—when I die——" the veins on his forehead

swelled ominously. "Must cut it out—drinking too much—friend—wonder the wife sticks it—straight I do—thinks the world of me—must do—never stick it otherwise. Skinful last night—perfectly damnable—won't do. Promised to get the coals in. Got 'em in all right, but dropped the bloody lot—top of the stairs to the bottom. Broke the kid's doll's pram—only had it a few days—Christmas present."

His coughing rose in an asthmatic crescendo, and he beat his chest with his fist, like a remorseful gorilla.

"Shut up, for God's sake!" said Ffolliott.

Bolt's hair was wet with precipitated fog and thawed icicles. He was taciturn and better-worldly.

"In a decently organized State," he said, "we shouldn't have this sort of thing to put up with."

"In a decently organized State would they prohibit fog?" enquired Chris meekly.

Bolt frowned.

"They'd prohibit the iniquitous system of private ownership of railways. They treat us like cattle, and crowd us all in third-class, to leave room for the capitalists' stomachs in the first."

Chris sighed, and stooped for the copra ledger.

And then Gattle arrived, looking a little whiter-faced than usual. He turned to his stool and took out his pens and blotter. Chris watched him. The little man was in some sort of trouble. He kept pausing to stare vacantly at the brown murk lapping the windows. Then he would make a pretence of working, only to break off again and sigh.

Chris opened the copra ledger and sighed too. Outside in the tawny twilight, strange visions appeared, dim caverns full of green light, blue sea, and hot yellow sand, little pale breasts in ice-green water, and two little butterflies, vibrant in the sunlight.

"Forty-five tons of No. 1 Cebu Copra in bulk, per s.s. *Molvania*."

He wrote the words carefully on the fresh clean page, with its neat red cash lines. The sirens moaned from invisible ships upon an invisible river.

"Fifty-five tons of No. 2 Sun-dried Cebu Copra in bags, per s.s. *Volcanic*."

He wrote the words carefully on another fresh clean page with neat red cash lines. And in the middle of the page shone the silver sickle of the new moon, and through the moaning of the sirens he heard a soft voice calling—"Oh moon, please let us be butterflies soon."

"Er—excuse me, Barrymore, could I—er—could I have a word with you?"

Chris turned his head. It was Gattle, white-faced, earnest, with a little nervous tremor of the pale lips.

"Of course, Gattle—anything wrong?"

The little man swallowed audibly.

"I thought—if you could just nip down to the lavatories, I'll follow. I—er—I'd rather the others didn't see me talking to you."

Chris nodded, waited for a few minutes, and slipped out of the office. The lavatories were empty and he began to wash his hands. Then Gattle peeped in, peeped out again, and entered.

"Barrymore . . . my . . . my youngster . . . going to hospital to-morrow—mastoid."

The little man was nearly blubbering. He was crying—crying passively, as he did most things. The tears were rolling down his thin white cheeks, without his consent and despite the effort of the pale lips to keep up some pretence of fortitude.

"Have a cigarette," said Chris hurriedly, and lit it for him. "Rotten luck," he went on, "but . . . it's not

as bad an operation as it used to be . . . it's always successful—and it usually puts them quite right—no more trouble.”

Gattle sniffed, and blew his nose.

“ I think you're right, Barrymore . . . only, of course . . . it's the only one we've got—and that makes you think all sorts of things. Er—thank you so much—I only wanted to tell you. I had to tell someone, and—all the others—they're fed up with my kid and its illnesses.”

Chris did not know what to say, yet he felt that he must say something.

“ Gattle—— ”

The little man had begun to wash his hands.

“ Yes? ”

“ How are you off—financially, I mean. Do you want anything . . . for your wife . . . or . . . the kid? ”

And then Gattle blubbered in earnest. Chris glanced despairingly at the door. No-one else must see him like that.

“ Half-a-second,” he muttered, and ran out of the door.

He was back in a few minutes.

“ I've got Turnbull's permission to take you out for a coffee. Told him you were a bit nipped by the cold.”

Gattle nodded, and allowed himself to be clothed in his shabby old overcoat and dusty bowler hat.

The coffee braced him and he poured out his heart. Chris listened, smoking and staring at the rows of empty tables and the mirrors blurred with fog.

He had always vaguely realized that Gattle's life must be a pretty drab affair, but never had his imagination envisaged anything quite so drab and pitiful. Gattle himself did not realize it. As he sat there, telling Chris all about himself, his wife, and his child, it was obvious that he was conscious of little more than a run of bad luck. Chris began to understand the importance of Gattle's baby. It was the

only living thing in the Gattle household. All else was lifeless monotony, hard work, and chilling penury. The Gattle baby justified such things—made them endurable.

Condemned to be for ever the servant of other men, Gattle had tasted in parenthood the first and only flavour of individuality. His baby was his own. It was the one thing that he had ever created, and, like Jehovah, he looked on his creation and found it good.

As the recital ended, Chris felt uncomfortable again. He was expected to say something, and there was nothing he could say, so he blurted out :

“ Do you want any cash, Gattle? ”

The little man stammered and coughed.

“ I . . . I couldn't pay you back for months, Barrymore. I owe ten pounds to the doctor now.”

Chris struggled vainly to remember how much he had left in his account. He knew it wasn't much, but between “ not much ” and “ how much ” was the difference between being able to write a cheque and being afraid to do so. Finally he remembered that he had securities. The blessed word, so apt in terminology, comforted him. He had spoken once to the Manager of Barland's Bank about securities. It had been an academic discussion, but it had given Chris a great sense of comfort. Liens had been mentioned, and Chris liked the word “ lien.” With a lien one could get a loan, and Chris liked the word “ loan ” even better than the word “ lien.”

He wrote out a cheque for ten pounds and passed it across.

“ Cheer up! ” he said, and picking up the two bills hurried to the cash desk.

He had entered some hemp in the copra ledger and corrected his mistake, before Gattle returned.

Then Mr. Skillan sent for Gattle, and gradually it got

round that Gattle's baby was ill again. Ffolliott expressed his disgust.

"Pity it doesn't die," he muttered to Chris. "It's no good to itself and it's a burden on its father."

Chris stared into the brown fog.

"It'd upset Gattle, if it did."

"Just at first—but he'd be much better off without it, and in any case—what's Gattle got to do with it? It's the kid who's got to face its life—not its father, and what prospects has it got if it lives? A life of poverty and drudgery in some perfectly bloody hole like this."

"Yes, of course—er—that's all right in theory, but—well, Gattle's fond of the kid."

Ffolliott smiled in faint derision.

"Is this one of the young moderns speaking?"

"Damn the moderns!" muttered Chris, and entered some copra in the hemp ledger. He was disturbed a moment later by Bolt.

"Scandalous business this, about Gattle's baby. There he is, without an adequate salary, sweated by these entrepreneurs, and without the means even to see his child has a few comforts."

Chris sighed wearily.

"What about a whip round for him?"

Bolt frowned.

"It's not our place to lend. In a properly organized State——"

"Oh, blast properly organized States!" said Chris.

Bolt stared, and went, and Chris entered some sugar in the copra ledger.

Then a husky voice whispered:

"I say, friend—things are a bit tight—at home. Er—do you think you could—advance me a fiver till the thirty-first?"

Chris was in a dilemma. He often lent Ginn money, and Ginn always repaid it promptly. And Ginn's promptness in repayment was a matter of very nice personal honour. The last man in the world Chris would have risked hurting by a refusal was Ginn.

"Well——" he began.

Ginn coughed.

"Quite all right, friend—don't bother."

He walked away, but ten minutes later he was back again.

"I—I'm afraid I've been a bit of a nuisance, friend—borrowing—but—if you could manage it this time—I won't bother you again—it's pretty urgent."

The words "lien" and "loan" echoed through Chris's head.

"Right-ho, Ginn! Slip outside and I'll give you a cheque."

The transaction was completed, and Chris returned to his ledger.

At twelve o'clock, Ginn slipped something into his hand.

"Shan't want it, friend—Gattle tells me you've done it."

After lunch there was suppressed excitement at Batten & Trench's. The annual increases of salaries were always made known on the 30th December. The notifications were handed round in envelopes by Mr. Skillan personally. He was a bustling, efficient business man, who believed that everyone could, if they tried, be as bustling and efficient as himself. He knew all there was to know about copra and hemp and sugar, and very little about anything else.

He seldom had occasion to speak to Chris—nor had he occasion now. There was no envelope for Chris.

With darkness, the fog thickened. The street lamps had vanished. The noise of the traffic had sunk to a low-pitched rumble. From the pavements, a tawny glimmer marked the passage of invisible vehicles. Even the saloon bar windows of the "Crown" were hidden, as Chris walked with Ffolliott

and Ginn along the strip of pavement between 101 Unity Square and the door of the public-house.

A wan glow suffused the fog, and pallid letters appeared upon steamy glass: "Johnny Walker's Whisky"—"Booth's Dry Gin."

The swing-doors creaked, and they were in warmth and light, among a crowd of men, all in overcoats and bowler hats, and all crowded round the bar.

Ffolliott nodded towards a leather settle.

"Bitter?" he queried.

Ginn and Chris nodded and sat down.

There was a fire burning to the left of the seat, and a small table facing them, with a brass rail round it. Ffolliott arrived with three glasses.

"Here's fun!" he said, and they all drank.

The beer was cold and sour, and as Chris put down his glass he grimaced. Ginn nodded.

"Tasted better bitter—but it's better than no bitter," he said, and began to fill his pipe.

The doors creaked at intervals to admit more humanity and more fog. The tobacco smoke was struggling to keep the air blue, but it was losing against the fog. There was a hubbub of voices and the chink of glass, and the squeak and thud of the white handles of the beer-engines, manipulated by a pair of bored barmaids.

"Same again?" enquired Ginn.

Ffolliott nodded, and Ginn stood up. Chris said nothing. He knew the ritual. They would stay there for at least an hour, and in that hour they would drink at least six glasses of bitter, at least five of which they did not want.

Ffolliott read his thoughts.

"The pub's the clerk's club, Barrymore," he said, staring moodily at the fire. And then he burst out—"Christ! What a perfectly bloody existence! Nine hours in an office,

two hours getting there and back again, three hours in a pub, seven hours in bed. Total, twenty-one hours out of twenty-four, a salary that means economy if you're single and misery if you're married, and a prospect of thirty to forty years, growing old and sour and sodden among people you hate the sight of! "

Ginn returned.

" Here's fun ! " said Ffolliott mechanically. He sipped.

" What perfectly bloody beer, Ginn—order three Scotches to take the taste out of our mouths."

He passed him a note and Ginn went to the bar again.

" Barrymore," said Ffolliott suddenly, " I'm damn sorry you didn't get a rise, but all the same—it's the best thing that could have happened to you."

" Why? " said Chris.

" Because you won't be mug enough to think you've got a future in that perfectly bloody hole. There's no carrot dangling in front of your eyes, and if you'll take my advice you'll quit as soon as possible. I wish to God I had, when I first came back from Manila."

" But what the hell am I to do? "

" You'll be all right—anywhere outside commerce. And what's commerce, anyway? It's just scientific thieving, with a knighthood for the top man and the gutter for the underdog. Turnbull's seventy-one, and he'll stay on there till he dies, because there's only the gutter waiting for him outside."

" Surely they'll give him a pension? "

Ffolliott laughed.

" The Liberal Party instituted Old Age Pensions—why should Mr. John augment them by a private one to Turnbull? My dear boy—the City's the home of seedy clerks, smutty stories, and 'swipes' like we're drinking to-night. Quit while you're young, because when you're older you won't be able to."

"Three Scotches, friends," muttered Ginn, and sat down, wheezing.

Then a voice chimed in:

"Ah! Just in time to join you—mine's a Scotch."

The latest arrival was Jenkins, a short, perennially flushed man of about fifty years of age. He had the appearance of being good-natured, the ability to seem so, and the reputation of being the meanest man in Batten & Trench's. He was as assertive as he was ignorant, and as incompetent as he was cunning. With all, he had a mental and physical rind that was pachydermatous in its invulnerability. He satisfied his thirst at the expense of any man, and his lechery at the expense of any woman. Between the two tastes, he often asserted, there was little to choose. He was married and had two children.

Ginn bought him a whisky which he drank with eupeptic gusto, his little blue eyes, wistfully lecherous, fixed upon the plumper of the two barmaids.

He seldom spoke to Chris inside the office, but inside a bar he would speak to anyone. The whisky had warmed him and he referred to Chris's having received no annual increase. With exquisite indelicacy, he said everything that was most obvious and most hurtful, and completed his condolences on Chris's misfortune by congratulations on his own success.

"Twenty—my boy!" he said, "That's the sort of rise to get. You can do a lot with an extra twenty pounds—if you don't tell your wife you've got it."

Chris ordered four more whiskies. It was his turn and he obeyed tradition. Then Ginn made some reference to Tiny's approaching marriage.

The word "marriage" brought a gleam to Jenkins' eye. He remembered his own marriage, and grinned. He then proceeded to remember his marriage in detail.

Suddenly Chris stood up.

"I'll quit, Ffolliott," he said. "Good-night all!"

Jenkins glanced up quickly.

"Eh?—Here, don't be in a hurry. I had an experience the night before last—it'll interest you—you're a young fellow who likes skirt," he shook his head waggishly, "I've seen you with that little dark bit."

Ginn stood up, but it was too late. Chris had leaned forward.

"You bloody outsider!" he said, and went out through the swing-doors into the fog and frost.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I

CHRIS groped his way through the freezing shroud. Great naphtha flares were roaring at the cross-roads, throwing sprawling shadows upon the eddying vapour—shadows of hurrying people; featureless, colourless shapes that flitted to and fro like phantom figures at a witches' revel.

But he managed to find his way to Mappin & Webb's, where Tiny's wedding present was waiting to be called for.

The journey home was a nightmare. He was tired now—too tired to be amused. The pressure of other bodies against his own filled him with a kind of numb despair. There were millions and millions of them, and he'd got to find a place among them—be cleverer, more efficient, or more lucky than most of them, if he were ever to find a home for Babe and a future for himself.

He had to stand all the way to Belgrave Station, and walk all the way from the station to Fulham. The 'buses were packed, both inside and out. It was nearly eight when he reached the flat. He leant for a moment against the wall, moving his arms slowly to coax life back into the elbow joints, crammed with long custody of the heavy box. Finally he slipped the latchkey into the lock, but before he could open the door it was opened from within and Babe faced him, warm and glowing from the fireside.

"Oh, you poor little tired cherub," she whispered, and

drew him to her, kissing his cold lips and pressing her warm cheeks against the damp, chilled flesh of his.

He took off his hat, and sighed, and dropped his head on her shoulder, and a minute bead of frozen fog dissolved and dropped from the curly hair upon the black, and hung glistening above her little ear.

And then he raised his head and smiled, and pointed down at the parcel, and she nodded and smiled too, and together they carried it into the hall and shut the door. She pulled off his coat and gloves and rubbed his hands with hers, and felt them bitterly cold, and hesitated, and blinked, and slipped them beneath the little coat she wore over her woollen jumper, and warmed them against the wool that warmed her breasts.

The door behind them opened and they drew apart. And there stood Tiny, with warm cheeks and sparkling eyes, framed against a background of dark carpet and bright fire that danced and glowed in the joy of battle with the fog and frost.

"Oh, Chris darling—you were the only thing missing to make everything absolutely marvellous!"

She caught his arm and dragged him into the snug room, where Bill sat smoking in a deep chair by the fire-side.

"And, Chris," she continued excitedly, "we've heard from Elaine this morning, and we're going to have a marvellous time at Okebourne. The river's frozen right down, miles past the 'Anchor,' and we're going to skate by torch-light and see the New Year in, and we're not being married till the afternoon—so that we needn't get up too early on New Year's Day."

Chris smiled.

"Good," he said, and crossing to the fire, knelt down and warmed his hands.

"Bit of luck, Batten & Trench closing New Year's Day, eh, Chris?" said Bill.

"Nicer if they closed for ever," said Chris. "When are you and Tiny going down?"

"By the ten o'clock from Waterloo. What time will you get away?"

"Four. Old Turnbull's fixed it for me."

"I love old Turnbull!" breathed Tiny, staring into the dancing fire.

Chris smiled, and stood up.

"There's something in the hall for you, Tiny."

She rushed out of the room, followed by Bill. A moment later they were back again, and Tiny was tearing frantically at the brown paper, and Bill was trying to calm her and cut the string at the same time. And out came shavings and tissue paper, and the table was hidden by the debris.

"Oh, Chris!"

She drew back, hands clasped beneath her chin, and stared—blue eyes round as little moons.

"I say, Chris," muttered Bill, "it really is awfully good of you."

Piece by piece, the shining silver was lifted out reverently and set down, till the whole effect was complete, and the light danced upon an elegant little silver teapot, milk jug, and sugar basin, and four dainty little cups, all shining in reflection from an oval silver tray.

Chris was danced round the room, and kissed indiscriminately, while Bill watched smiling and Babe watched thoughtfully.

"Supper, Chris boy?" she said as he was set free.

"Please, Babe."

"It's all ready in the kitchen."

He followed her to the small room, where the kitchener was red-faced and roaring, and a white cloth was spread, and a plate of piping hot soup was set before him.

She sat facing him, watching the colour come back into his cheeks as the soup warmed him.

"I thought it'd be nicer out here, Chris—they're too excited for us—to-night."

He wiped his lips and stared thoughtfully at his empty plate.

"I suppose it's only natural—but somehow I thought she'd feel it a bit—leaving here, and . . . and me."

She took his plate and replaced it with one bearing sizzling rissoles.

"Would you feel it a lot leaving her if you were going to marry me—on New Year's Day?"

He looked up quickly.

"Yes, of course—how damn silly of me! We never see anything except from our own point of view, do we?"

"You do, you hopeless darling," she said, and bending, kissed the crown of his curly head.

When the food was gone, there was coffee, sipped lazily before the roaring fire.

"We're all 'tubbing' to-night, Chris boy."

"You and me—tub together, darling."

She jumped up.

"Ah! that's better—I always know you're happy when you say naughty, lovely things, that make me squirmy right inside."

She sat on his knee, and the fire glowed upon them, and the fog and frost, and Batten & Trench's shrank away into unreality.

"Babe?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Do you think Tiny knows much—about sex, I mean?"

"Oh, of course she does."

"Yes—theoretically—but she's never met anyone who could tell her much, and—there's quite a lot to know,

you know, Babe. I mean—I should say Bill's—well—an amateur, and—I read a book once where it said that girls often had rather a bad time if the husband didn't quite understand . . . what a violent change it was—from virginity . . . to butterflies."

She glanced at the fire, and the red glow shone in little pinpoints of light in the centres of her dark eyes.

"I think, Bill—will be . . . quite . . . quite gentle."

"Oh, yes. I'm not criticizing Bill—only it's pretty revolutionary—complete taboo till bedtime—and complete knowledge when the light goes out. I wondered whether, perhaps, you could have a talk to her when you're in bed to-night—you're the only one that can do it without making her feel ridiculously self-conscious and guilty over something that's perfectly natural and—sweet."

There was a long pause.

"Yes—of course I could do that, only . . . Chris darling—you see—I . . . I don't know very much myself . . . not actual details—do you?"

"I've read a good deal about it."

Again there was a pause.

"Chris, darling!"

"Yes?"

"You—you've only read—haven't you?"

"Yes, Babe—honest!"

There was a faint sigh.

"I'm so glad—darling."

They kissed, and the fire roared, and outside the frozen fog lapped the windows.

"Well, Chris—if you'll tell me just all you know—I'll try to tell her to-night."

"Yes—that's a good idea."

Thereafter there was whispering—earnest whispering,

and whispered questions and whispered answers, and then silence and a faint sigh.

"Oh, Chris!—I . . . wish we were being married on New Year's Day."

The door opened and Tiny popped her head in:

"Break away—chaps—we've opened a bottle of port."

II

The hanger was leafless, against a sky all stars. On the banks of the frozen river a mighty bonfire shot serpentine flames, and a thousand little sparks rode the night, like minute meteors. The gaunt beech trees were a phalanx of frozen skeletons, and the flickering light shone upon the boles and boughs and twigs, encrusted with sparkling rime, till the whole wood pulsed, and a myriad jewels flashed silver points into the darkness.

The frozen river was black and polished, save where the dancing light threw flickering pathways of orange and red athwart the smooth ice.

Figures glided swiftly, passing and re-passing, coloured for an instant in the fire's gleam, to turn again to black. And a faint rhythmic ringing came up from the ice and echoed faintly against the leafless hanger. Here and there, a pine-wood torch was borne aloft, and flitted through the darkness, guttering with a plume of tawny flame that spread out, waving like locks of flaming hair.

Upon the banks a few figures stood watching, among them Mr. and Mrs. Goolan and Elaine and Dr. Crouch, their faces glowing in the light of the bonfire. A pair of skaters passed them—a girl in a grey coat tipped with white fur, and her companion, hatless and coatless, a coloured muffler round his neck, the ends waving over his shoulders.

"Look at Chris—no hat or coat!" muttered Dr. Crouch.

"He's warmer without them than we are with," murmured Mr. Goolan, and turned to his wife. "Half-past eleven, dear. We'd better go back and get things ready for them—they'll all come in with the New Year. Come along, Elaine—Crouch, you must join us in a glass of wine."

In the shadow of the hanger, Clym stood smoking a cigarette. He wore a pair of big Canadian skates, with points curved over like the toe of a Persian slipper.

Two figures wobbled towards him.

"Come . . . come back for me, Billy darling," quavered Tiny.

"Of course, darling." The other figure shot away.

"Clym—darling . . . come to me—I can't come to you."

He glided to her side and put his arm round her.

"Well, young bride-to-be," he said, "what do you want me for?"

"Lots of things, Clym darling—er—steer me to the bank and let's sit down."

He obliged.

"Cigarette, please," she whispered.

He held the match, and watched the little fairylike face flush and pale again, as she held the cigarette in her little gloved hand and drew gently, the pretty lips shaping a wasted kiss.

The match flickered and went out, but the light of the distant bonfire shone elfishly through the skeleton trees, and threw patterns of the twigs upon her face.

"What do you want me for, Tiny?"

The voice was so gentle that she glanced up at his face just visible in the flickering glow from the bonfire. Shyly, she put out her hand and took his, and kissed it.

"You've been the dearest thing in the world to all of us, Clym."

He coughed awkwardly.

"I haven't done much—I just like you all—and, well—I've enjoyed being with you—that's all."

A faint sigh sounded, and as though the wind heard and sympathized, a gust fluttered through the hanger, and the bare branches creaked and a little shower of powdery rime fell and settled in her hair, and sparkled in the flickering light from the distant fire.

"Clym!"

"Yes?"

"You said you liked us all—and—that means you like Chris too, doesn't it?"

"Of course, Tiny."

She half-turned and caught his hand in hers again, and pressed the fingers, each one in turn.

"Really like him, Clym?"

"Tiny—Chris is the best youngster I've met since the War."

She sighed happily.

"Oh, I'm glad you said that, because, Clym . . . he's going to miss me frightfully—till—till he marries Babe—at nights and in the morning—and—at meal times—and you see, Clym—we're twins, and twins are—well, they're not just ordinary brothers and sisters—they're extra close—specially us, because of Father."

There was a pause.

"Chris'll be all right," said Clym.

"You really think so?—I mean—I wondered sometimes if . . . if you didn't think that perhaps he was rather irresponsible."

He crossed his legs, and sat with his elbow on his knee and his hand supporting his chin.

"You mean you think I might have helped him more—to get something that was worth doing."

"Oh—Clym—I'm not criticizing you!"

He laughed quietly.

"Listen, Tiny," he said. "I took a fancy to Chris, the first time I saw him, in the bar of the 'Anchor' with you, when you were drinking good health and good-bye to all your friends. And then what Crouch told me made me like him more. But—well—knowing his history, I guessed he'd want to take a few deep breaths before he sobered down. So I've not tried to help him, except just to see that he, and all of you, kept your heads. If I'd introduced him to the people who may be able to help him a little later on—if I'd introduced him at first, when he just wanted to play the fool and feel his arms and legs—he'd probably have wasted the opportunity—it doesn't matter that he's wasted his chance at Batten & Trench's. If he lived to be a thousand, he'd never make a good commercial clerk—if he did, I'd let him go to the devil, cheerfully. But he's beginning to simmer down, and he's going to write—don't you worry. He'll make a name for himself one day—but he must make an ass of himself first—and that he's done gloriously for nearly two years."

Two figures slid by, hugging each other precariously. They came to an unstable standstill, genuflecting.

"I must see Tiny for a minute, Babe."

Clym stood up.

"Here she is!" he called, and helped her to her feet.

Shyly she looked up at him.

"Clym darling," she whispered, "I'll be a married woman to-morrow, so . . . if you want to kiss me—kiss me while I'm single."

He laughed quietly, tilted her little chin and kissed her cool lips.

"Good-bye—Baby," he said, and slid away, catching Babe round the waist and dragging her, protesting, across the glimmering ice.

"Is that you, Chris dear?" whispered Tiny.

"Yes—I want just a minute or two with you—it's nearly twelve."

They caught hold of each other to keep their balance, and, swaying precariously, kissed and laughed, and sat down upon the bank.

For a while there was silence.

"Do you recognize—where we're sitting, Tiny?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, why—yes, of course, Chris—these trees—and there's the little bay in the bank—it's where the punt was moored that night—Father was buried."

She sighed, and as she sighed the old year died, and the clock of St. Cyprian's struck the hour of midnight. Silently they sat listening to the twelve silvery chimes that came drifting down to the frozen valley.

And then the peals rang out, and the little valley gathered the sprinkled music of the bells, and the old hanger came to life and sent a hundred chiming echoes ringing down the frozen river, to the wide world beyond.

They sat motionless in the chiming darkness, and all that they had meant to say was silenced by the music of the bells. From the distance came the sound of singing voices, and the tune and words of "Auld Lang Syne" came drifting down the river, mingling with the pealing of the bells.

He turned suddenly and caught her to him and kissed her.

"Good-bye, Tiny," he whispered, "and all the best of luck and happiness."

Then he was gone, skimming over the ice—a slight figure, wanly growing in the light of the dying fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AFTER the wedding, Clym, Chris and Babe returned to London by the four-thirty train. It was a dismal journey. A thaw had set in and the fog had come back again, and, by the time they reached Waterloo, was as thick as it had been on the eve of Tiny's wedding.

They went to the buffet for a cup of coffee, where Clym made a herculean effort to dispel the gloom.

"Briggs is away for a few days—would you two care to come and stay at my place—till things have settled down a bit?"

For the first time since the ceremony at St. Cyprian's, Chris showed interest in his surroundings.

"Thanks awfully, Clym—we'd love it."

Babe smiled.

"Clym—you are a dear!"

"It means you'll have to be the 'tweeny'," said Clym.

"Of course."

They took a taxi and crawled through the fog to St. Stephen's Mansions. Babe and Chris got the supper. Clym was reading a copy of *The Moderate*, unaware of the fact that it was nearly a month old.

After supper, they all sat by the fire, but there was not much conversation, and what little there was dried up, following a remark from Clym.

"Silly of Mother to cry in the middle of the service," he said, addressing the fire.

"I hate weddings!" said Babe vehemently.

At ten o'clock, Chris went to bed. He was tired, and Batten & Trench awaited him in the morning.

They stayed with Clym a week, during which time Babe was very busy. Each morning she got the breakfast and thereafter vanished, returning in time to get the evening meal.

Chris had not been back to the flat since Tiny left it, and talked vaguely about "finding digs somewhere."

"You haven't got time to mess about trying to find digs," said Babe. "You leave it all to me."

Chris acquiesced. The weather remained foggy, and Batten & Trench had changed for the worse. Jenkins had not forgotten the evening in the "Crown," and in numberless small ways had done his best to let Chris know it.

A letter from Tiny, breathing the ecstasy of Madeira sun and honeymoon had only served to emphasize the fog-bound sterility of copra, hemp and sugar.

The key of the flat was due to be surrendered on the 9th of January, and it was not till the morning of the 7th that Babe found the only rooms she considered suitable for Chris. They were in Morris Square, Chelsea, and were strongly recommended by the wife of a chauffeur in Butler's Mews. Babe inspected them, or rather, it, for there was only one—a long, pleasant room, with a pair of windows opening upon a balcony overlooking the gardens in the centre of the square.

The room was unfurnished, and the landlady agreed to a rental of twenty-five shillings a week, including breakfast. The provision of the other meals was Babe's secret.

She felt a faint glow of pleasure as she stepped out onto the balcony. In front of him would be greenery when the trees were in leaf, and from the corner he would be able to see a strip of the river.

She liked the landlady too. She was not old enough to

be grasping, nor young enough to be clinging. Mrs. Welland was, in fact, a pleasant featured, middle-aged woman, who knew something of Chris from her friend in Butler's Mews. Clym finally enlisted her as something more than a landlady, by discovering in her husband a man who had served in his company.

The next day he absented himself from the affairs of *The Moderate* and assisted Babe in the removal of Chris's furniture from the flat to the new bed-sitting-room. When the day's labours were complete, he sighed approvingly.

"Now," he said, "it's up to you."

"Just how do you mean, Clym dear?"

"Why—you've got to see he works—not the copra business, but the other—writing—he's played long enough, and—it's up to you."

She laughed happily.

"You watch," she said, and took him out to tea at the "Green Grasshopper."

The 9th of January was a Saturday. Clym had gone to Okebourne for the week-end and had taken the Austin with him.

Babe was quite content. She wanted neither Clym nor Austin that afternoon. She only wanted pleasant weather, and that was vouchsafed to her.

As she stood waiting for Chris at the entrance to 101 Unity Square, she felt in her bones that winter was passing. It was a mild, humid day, with the streets still wet from a morning of intermittent rain. But now the sun was out—a weak, watery sun, but one that had passed the winter solstice. Even there, in the very heart of business London, she could taste the sweeter, softer quality of the air. Ahead were Spring and the cuckoo, and the first primroses in rainy lanes and woods.

She felt arms round her waist, and turning her body from

the hips, laughed softly and bent back, face upturned, and took his kiss, in the very heart of business London.

"Babe, darling—I can sniff Spring in the air to-day."

"And I've been sniffing it for ten minutes, darling."

"Let's sniff together!"

They sniffed and laughed, and a siren boomed from the river, and above the line of the distant parapet a great ship slid by, outward bound for the sea, and the sun, and the wind.

They went all the way by 'bus, because the sun was shining, and the City emptying and work was done with for a little while.

"I'm dying to see the room!"

"I think you'll like it, Chris."

And he did like it, as he stood just inside the door and saw his bed and his bookcase, and his arm-chair, and the carpet that Tiny had refused to take, and the new chintz curtains that Babe had made and hung, and the two small nudes that she had painted specially for him in the first six months of their love.

He liked Mrs. Welland too, and was introduced to Mr. Welland, and liked him because he liked Clym.

And when he had finished liking everything and everybody, he sent everybody out of the room except Babe, because he liked her best. And she liked being liked best so much that it was two hours before they both decided that they liked tea too.

Wisely, she avoided the "Green Grasshopper," not wishing that he should see Tiny's shade eating great, bilious cakes, big blue eyes adoring all things sweet.

After tea, they went down to the Embankment, and leant on the coping and stared at the river, and across to where the leafless trees shone with the sun upon their wet limbs. He tried to thank her, but she only laughed and told him not to be emotional.

"If you want to please me, darling," she added, "I want you to come with me now, and ask no questions till I say you may."

She glanced sideways at him from beneath the brim of a little green felt hat.

"Mysterious creature!" he said, smiling.

"Beardless boy!" she retorted, and took his arm.

As they approached Fulham, he glanced at her enquiringly.

"No questions—you promised, Chris!"

He nodded, and remained silent, even when she entered the main door of the flats he knew so well. But when she took out a latchkey and opened the door he had opened so often, he forgot his promise.

"Babe—please!"

She laughed, and led him in and shut the door behind him.

"I'm the new tenant, darling—till it's taken by Mr. and Mrs. Barrymore."

It was nearly five minutes before she was free to lead him into the sitting-room. It was the same, yet different. It was Butler's Mews and Tiny's kingdom too, and all the associations of both were there in sad, sweet harmony.

He walked to the window.

"Queer, that this should have happened twice in my life!"

He spoke more to himself than to her.

"What has happened twice, Chris dear?"

He turned round.

"Why, twice my own home's gone, and both times I've . . . I've been allowed to go on using it as though it were still my own."

He broke off suddenly and caught her hands in his.

"And that sounds ungrateful, doesn't it? But it's not meant to be—it's only that—oh, Babe—shall I ever have something that's really my own to give you?"

She smiled.

"Yourself, darling—one day—quite soon!"

She led him to the couch, and lit the fire and brought cigarettes and an ash tray, and sat down beside him.

"Listen, Chris dear," she said thoughtfully. "I want to say one or two things—if you'll listen."

She paused and leant forward, her arms folded across her knees.

"There are two latchkeys—Chris—one for each of us. It's not my flat—it's ours—only we can't marry yet and live in it properly—I mean, both of us sleep here every night. Of course, whenever we're late at a show or that sort of thing—or it's just convenient—you can sleep here—I've put a bed in your old room—but ordinarily, of course, you'll have to sleep and breakfast at Morris Square. That's why I made her quote for breakfast only. And this is yours as much as mine, and you're to use it as your own, and have your meals here when you want, and work here—I'll be working too, so we shan't bother each other."

He held her chin, and turned her face so that she had to look at him.

"I go fifty-fifty in the rent, Babe."

She laughed.

"Pooh! What absolute tripe!—that sort of thing's dead years ago. There's only one rule where you and I are concerned—the one who's got the money pays, and that's the only decent arrangement between a man and woman who mean to keep together."

"But——" he began, but she interrupted him with a kiss and stood up with her back to the fire. The green cigarette-holder projected from the corner of her mouth, and the light from the fire edged the neat tweed skirt and jumper. Her hands were in her pockets, her feet set a little apart.

"Chris darling—just listen a bit more. We've got to

work hard, both of us. But we're lucky, because we've both got a gift that isn't everybody's. I can paint and you can write, and for nearly two years—we've just played at our work—and enjoyed ourselves—and it was right—you needed it, darling, and so did I. But Tiny's married now, and Bill's a lawyer, and though, of course, they're dears—both of them—they're not like us, and they've sort of rather interfered with our development and atmosphere, and things like that. And we've got wonderful work to do—work we love—and we'll love it more and more as we get to do it better. And we're going to stick together, Chris—and be what we are—people who know what's worth doing in the world, when you've got the gift to do it. And you've got to break clear of the old ideas, about who pays bills and cooks, and we're both going to do what we can—not what we ought. And just now, I've got more money than you, so I'm paying—and you've got a rotten job—so I'm cooking and looking after you. And, Chris boy, we're through with all silly things that don't matter, and we're going to work like the devil—me painting and you writing, and we'll come out on top in the end, darling—because—it's in us, and we're young, and we mean to.”

He jumped up and caught her to him.

“Babe—we're going to have the most wonderful time together!”

She laughed exultantly, and they drew close, and the firelight edged their young bodies and threw their shadows upon the wall—two shadows that danced gaily, in the little room where four shadows had so often danced.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AT the top of Trafalgar Square Chris put down his suitcase and blew out his cheeks. He had been hurrying, quite unnecessarily. It was only two twenty-five by the clock of St. Martin's. He leant on the coping of the balustrade, smoking, and looked down at the fountains and the lions, and beyond, to where Whitehall narrowed to the misty outline of Big Ben. He wondered whether Parliament were sitting, and hoped, for the sake of the six hundred odd lunatics who wished to spend their lives talking, that it was not.

For it was late March, and the day was as lamb-like as a late March day should be. The sun was shining, the fountains gushed silver, the pigeons were sailing round Nelson's Column in fluttering coveys.

St. Martin's struck the half-hour, and he picked up his suitcase, dodged 'buses and cars, and ran up the steps of the National Gallery. He was glad to be rid of the suitcase, he decided, as he tucked the ticket into his pocket. All things that needed carrying ought to be abolished. He ran up the staircase and into the first of the lofty rooms.

She was not there, and he paused, undecided. "I shall be among the Crivellis, darling," she had said, and added details that told him exactly who Crivelli was and where his work was to be found.

But he could never remember Crivelli very clearly. A Rubens or a Titian was easy. There was such a lot to look at in a Rubens or a Titian, but Crivelli, he suspected uneasily,

was the fellow who was always painting St. Sebastian as a dart-board.

In the end, he asked for Crivelli personally, and was given directions. And among the Crivellis he found her. She did not see him, so he allowed himself thirty seconds in which to contemplate her and congratulate himself.

She was sitting on the big seat in the middle of the room, one arm along the back. She was dressed in a knitted costume of dark green, gathered in at the waist by a leather belt with a big, buccaneer's buckle. One knee was drawn up, and both were visible, silkily dimpled and divinely tormenting. Upon her head was a little black beret, worn slantwise. The sun came through the skylight upon her. She was vividly, intensely alive.

And then she saw him, and eyes and lips laughed, and she jumped up and ran to him.

Almost in the moment of its consummation, the kiss was arrested by the eyes of the curious. They both coughed deprecatingly and sat down, and babbled in whispers.

"Got the suitcase, darling?"

"Of course, darling." He paused, and added, "These week-ends are really rather wonderful, aren't they?"

"Wonderful!" she murmured, and then she pouted faintly.

"Of course—they're not proper week-ends, are they?"

"Well, darling, they are really—only of course they're not improper."

She nodded, smiling dreamily.

Then she swung round suddenly.

"Bill thinks it's all wrong—these week-ends—he wrote this morning and said so."

"Oh, Bill! Send him a packet of sweet pea seeds and some weed-killer!"

"He's gone all to bits since he married."

"Fortunately, he hasn't infected Tiny—yet. She's on our side."

She nodded, and added vehemently:

"I'd like him to have his breakfast in a bed-sitting-room for six days a week—then he'd understand the seventh day."

"He wouldn't. God didn't, so all good Englishmen mustn't!"

She laughed.

"Come along," she said, and took his arm.

They sauntered away, and came to a standstill before Da Vinci's "Madonna and Children." He knew his limitations—knew that in every picture he looked at he missed half that she could see. But he loved these afternoons with her, in the quiet, lofty rooms, and loved them more for the mornings of copra, hemp, and sugar. He did not worry much that he could only vaguely understand the qualities she pointed out to him. It was colour he loved—colour and shape, and contact with dead men who had lived solely and absolutely for such things. An hour there effaced a week at Batten & Trench's, made all things clean and sweet again, gave perspective, dwarfed the City and its million ants, asserted from every colour, shape, and line that here at least was one thing money could not do.

She had told him it was wrong to wander indiscriminately—wrong to go from Crivelli to Titian, or from Botticelli to Da Vinci—but he took no heed. He just said he was a Philistine and gloried in contrast, and would deliberately stand, as he stood now, before that sombre masterpiece, and steep himself in the sublime nostalgia of religion, only to go straight to Rubens and feel the warm flesh of Bacchanals, and taste the spilled wine, and revel in the knowledge that he knew more moods than one and loved them all, and the fullness of life that could find room for all.

Just before four she lost him, only to find him again in the entrance hall, staring shamelessly at Angelo's "Leda."

"I thought so!" she said sighing.

"Do you know why I like that so much?"

"I can guess!"

"You can't—I like it because it represents the supreme triumph of æsthetics over ethics. Divinely frank, it is so divinely beautiful that neither moralist nor Philistine has dared destroy it."

She nodded.

"It really is a lovely thing," she said slowly. "Look at the modelling of those limbs, and the line of the swan's neck."

"I thought so!" said Chris, sighing.

She looked at him, lips parted in anxious surprise.

"Thought what, darling——"

"That you liked that sort of picture."

"Oh!—but, Chris darling, I'm an artist."

"I see—and what am I?"

She took his arm.

"A swan, I'm afraid, darling," she murmured.

They had tea in their favourite place—a small café not far from Burlington House.

"I'm dying for to-morrow, Chris darling! I simply love our Sundays—with you scribbling away and me painting—and I'm dying for you to write another chapter—and read it to me."

"Are you really, Babe?"

She nodded quickly.

"It's going to come off—that book, Chris!—you see!"

He laughed excitedly.

"I wonder!—I believe Clym thinks so. If it does, it's all your doing really—because—well—it is, anyway—and if you look like that I'll kiss you in front of the waitress!"

She pursed her lips, and her eyes said "Please." Chris poured out another cup of tea.

"For the next chapter, you'll have to do another illustration, Babe—you simply must—you've got Tony and Chloë absolutely, in just a few lines."

"Well, darling, that was easy, wasn't it?—because Tony's you and Chloë's me."

"We're rather nice, don't you think?"

"Personally, I think we're darlings—oh, do hurry up and finish, Chris."

"Don't be importunate, woman!"

She held out a piece of éclair on the end of his fork, and popped it into his mouth.

"Seriously, darling—if it does come off, we will marry, won't we? We'll be able to knock up about three hundred a year, with your seventy-five and my one-twenty, and your books and my posters and postcards, and——"

"You haven't added in Batten & Trench."

She laughed derisively.

"You're coming out of that hole before six months are over."

"Yes, darling."

"And you're going to marry me as soon as your book's published."

"Yes, darling."

"And you'll never get tired of me, will you?"

"Yes—no, darling."

She grimaced at him, and stood up.

"Come along. I'm dying to see you in your fancy dress, and we've got to bath and change."

She crushed out her cigarette and gathered up her portfolio.

"Is Ffolliott coming?"

"Oh! good Lord! I quite forgot—yes, he's coming. He's got over the fancy dress business. He suddenly

remembered his Manila outfit—you know—white drill suit and a pith helmet. He was really rather amusing when he described the clothes—he said he'll look like a piece of White Cargo."

She smiled thoughtfully.

"Do you like him a great deal, Chris?"

"Well—not like I like Clym—but I feel a bit sorry for him—he's missed the boat, somehow."

She nodded.

"Yes, I know what you mean—but—well, I don't think he's quite your sort, Chris."

They had hired rather elaborate fancy dress. It was the last ball of the term, and Babe's last term at the school, and they pleaded both these factors as excuses to each other for each other's extravagance.

She was going as a Persian slave, and Chris as a gladiator of the retiarius class, with trident and net. Chris said both would come in useful if she got too Persian—the net for her, and the trident for importunate partners.

When they reached the flat, the kitchener was nearly red-hot, and Babe boiled herself in a bath full of scented water.

Then Chris simmered for half an hour, and smoked cigarettes instead of washing himself, with the result that she was dressed before he was dry.

She heard him go to the bedroom and close the door. It was just half-past six. And then the bell rang, and when she opened the door, Clym and Elaine stood on the landing.

Her mind worked quickly. She knew Elaine had been spending a few days with Tiny and Bill, in the new house at Walton-on-Thames.

"Hullo, Elaine!" The voice was a perfect blend of surprise and gratification.

"Hullo, Babe! Going to a dance?"

"A ball!" corrected Babe, and showed them into the sitting-room.

She sensed instantly that Clym was ill at ease. He stroked his chin incessantly and said nothing.

"Where's Chris?" said Elaine.

"Dressing—he's going as a gladiator."

"Any chance of a drink?" muttered Clym.

There was the sound of a door opening, and a voice called:

"Can I hear Clym?"

"You can," said Clym.

"Good! Come in, Clym—I've got my filet on, and one sandal, but I've got caught up in my net, and I've sat on my trident, and . . . er . . . I'm cold, and need help."

They all burst out laughing.

The voice continued:

"Did I hear Elaine?"

"You did," said Elaine.

"Oh, Elaine—how indelicate!"

Clym raised his eyes despairingly, and left the room.

"Well," said Babe, "I suppose Bill's sent you—eh?"

Elaine sat down.

"Don't let's have a row, Babe."

"If you're going to interfere between Chris and me, I shall—and not only with you, but with all of them—except Clym—Clym's sane."

"We're only a bit scared that someone will hear about these week-ends."

Babe threw up her head.

"I don't care if they do—they're all we've got—Chris and me—and Tiny and Bill have got everything. And we've never been so happy, and we're not hurting anyone . . . and . . . I'm helping Chris . . . when no one else cares a damn—that he's stuck in that vile hole—doing work he hates—

when he's got ten times the brain and imagination that Bill's got—with his rotten sweet peas and his potty little lawn . . . and I'm not going to stop having Chris here . . . and if you interfere, any of you . . . then we'll do what you're all afraid of . . . and it'll be your fault, all of you, because you can't believe people can control themselves unless you're there to see they do . . . and, now you've made me cry . . . I suppose you're happy."

She sat down on the couch and wept angrily.

Elaine sighed despairingly.

"Babe, we didn't think that—honest!"

Babe shot up again, and the cloak fell off. Arms and shoulders were bare, and two little tinsel shields moved agitatedly as she breathed. Upon her head was a tiny cap of gauze, hung round with tinsel jewels that flashed and winked. The little baggy trousers of pale green reached to the bare ankles, where two anklets of gold shone above the little satin shoes with turned-up toes.

"If you didn't think it—why did you come here?"

"Oh, I don't know, except that we were afraid it may get back to Okebourne."

There was a moment's silence.

"Well—if it does, it must—Chris and I have got work to do, and we mean to do it."

The door opened, and Chris entered, followed by Clym.

Elaine glanced at the young gladiator, and her heart melted. It was impossible to ask for decorum from those laughing blue eyes and whimsically impudent lips.

He stood with his net hanging over one arm, and hand grasping his trident. The curly hair had been ruthlessly cropped and clung to the well-shaped head, encircled by a narrow purple file. The tunic left bare one arm and half the white torso. The slim legs were bare from the knees and tapered to the gold lacings of his sandals. Despite the

Roman dress, it was the head, face and figure of an Athenian youth, such a one as might have inspired Phidias to create in marble the likeness of a youthful athlete.

He glanced at Babe, and from her to Elaine.

"Have you been making her cry, Elaine?"

Babe interrupted.

"No—she hasn't . . . I wanted to cry, so I . . . I just cried."

Elaine smiled.

"I'm afraid I did, Chris—in fact, I've made rather a mess of things."

Chris nodded.

"I'm afraid you have. Aren't you ashamed of yourself—putting nasty immoral ideas into the heads of the young and innocent?"

"Well, I'm damned!" muttered Clym.

Babe turned on him.

"And I suppose you've been moralizing to Chris?"

Chris chuckled.

"He tried to, Babe, and it was the funniest thing in the world, because we both grinned in the middle of it."

Clym raised his eyes despairingly.

"Come on, Elaine—we'd better go."

"Don't look so upset, Clym dear," murmured Babe.
"We forgive you both."

"Eh?" exclaimed Clym.

"'Forgive' was the word," said Chris. "And to prove it, we'll take you both out to a spot of food at the 'Green Grasshopper' on Monday. Agreed?"

"Agreed," muttered Clym, and beckoned Elaine.

They went, discomfited but comforted.

Babe returned to the sitting-room, where Chris was waiting. He watched her sidle round the table, eyes down-cast.

"You're gloating!" she murmured, and came to a standstill, one hand plucking at the folds of the little green baggy trousers, the other at her bosom, where the small tinsel shields seemed suddenly to have become too small.

"You pretty thing!" he said gently.

She peeped up, hesitated, laughed, and ran to him. And suddenly he made a cast with his net and it fell over her head and shoulders and slipped down over her hips, and she was a prisoner.

The black eyes peeped through the netting.

"But . . . why, darling?"

He laughed exultantly.

"I'm a Roman centurion with the spoils of war—one perfectly good virgin in net, complete with trousers."

The perfectly good virgin gave a little bubbling laugh, and the net shook and the meshes parted, and a pair of red lips just showed, shaped to receive the kiss of subjection. He caught her to him, but the lips drew back and only the netting met his.

"Who's the slave now, darling," she whispered, eyes sparkling through the mesh.

"Ahem!—Quite.—I will free you."

He did so, and the net flew across the room, and the trident fell to the floor.

"Darling . . . please . . . remember, I'm a perfectly good virgin!"

"True," said Chris, and lit a cigarette.

She slipped her cloak round her, and took the cigarette from his hand, and inhaled languorously.

"Did Clym say much, Chris?"

"Good Lord, no!—I felt so sorry for him. I've never seen him so thoroughly uncomfortable—he simply can't do the moral business."

He paused and added thoughtfully:

"All the same—when he looked at me—I was rather glad that we'd not been butterflies that day at Tregasket."

She nodded and their eyes met, and then they sighed in unison.

Meanwhile, the Austin was speeding out to Walton-on-Thames.

"I think we may congratulate ourselves on having made complete asses of ourselves," said Clym.

"Absolutely!"

"Yet you would go."

"Oh, I know—but, Clym—it's rather difficult, when you've got two crazy things like them in the family—neither of them with any money and both dying to be married."

"They're quite happy."

"Not quite—now and then I've caught them looking at each other—and, well—they'll never be quite happy till they're married."

"Well, that won't be long—that book of his is going to sell."

"Clym! Do you really think so?"

"I'm certain of it. It's the most charmingly impudent thing I've read for years, and Babe's illustrations are perfect—sort of woodcuts—only a few lines, but what lines! She's got the two main characters absolutely, and—well—they're quite extraordinarily good, and most delightfully mad. If England can still laugh—they ought to sell at least ten thousand."

There was a pause.

"We must speak to Bill, Clym."

"Bill's a fool!"

"Quite, dear—that's why we must speak to him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE Burling School of Art had at one time been indirectly responsible for the only quarrel Babe had ever had with Clym. It was during her first term, when she was very proud of the Burling School of Art. Clym had described it as a "collection of happy little dabblers, seven-eighths of whom will never paint anything in their lives, except the inside of their suburban homes when they've married and settled down, and forgotten all about art."

"It's turned out some first-class artists, anyway," Babe had retorted. And Clym had replied :

"I wasn't thinking of those it had turned out, but those it had allowed to remain."

The truth about the Burling School of Art was probably somewhere between the two extremes voiced.

None of this was known to Ffolliott. Being English, he had an inherited distrust of Art; being a public school boy, he had an acquired contempt for it; but being, above all else, Ffolliott, he had a considerable interest in certain incidentals of Art, which he was never tired of using as an argument against artists.

The incidentals were the models. He had very vague ideas on the subject of models, and even less knowledge, but he knew that they posed in the nude, and a nude figure could be appreciated by everyone, even if he were not an artist. That artists sometimes chose other subjects than the human form, never occurred to him. To Ffolliott, Art was models, the models were women, and the women were nude.

When Chris had invited him to the dance, his first thought had been that he might meet some models. It was only later, when he considered it more leisurely, that he also remembered that he would certainly meet Babe. He had already met her some three or four times, at lunch or at tea in the City, but always with Chris present, and never for longer than an hour or so. But the meetings had been cumulative in their effect on Ffolliott. From regarding her in a general sense as a girl sexually attractive, he had ended by finding her particularly desirable. Beyond that, he had never trespassed. As she was Chris's choice, he excepted her from the general rule which governed his attitude to all women.

But now, as he sat in the hired car on his way to Chelsea and the Ball, he was conscious of a faint flavour of anticipation. He would dance with her that night, and he wondered how she would be dressed.

He dismissed the car, with orders that it was to return for him at two, passed through the little crowd of idle onlookers, and entered the building.

Opening out of the ballroom was a small salon, hung with the work of the students. Ffolliott would have liked to examine some of the pictures more closely, but the room was packed with gay costumes, and clamorous with eager young voices.

He felt mildly uncomfortable, and told himself he was no longer either young or eager. But he suddenly saw Babe, and instantly became both. She was standing a little way distant, chattering excitedly to a knot of people.

Ffolliott's eyes contracted to a misty intentness. He could see the vivacious little face in profile, the pretty lips laughing as she talked. His eyes strayed from the lips to the throat, and from the throat to the little tinsel shields that stirred faintly as she breathed. And they maddened

him—those little shields—with their exasperating intervention.

And then he noticed Chris, but Chris had become suddenly a silly boy of utter unimportance.

Chris turned his head, and a quick smile of recognition lit his face. There was an eager tug at Babe's wrist, and they both came forward to greet him.

Ffolliott waited. In the white drill suit, with the stiff tunic collar and patch pockets, he looked well and knew it. A gust of the old debonair mood of Manila days came back with the clothes he had worn when he was a white man among natives, instead of a clerk among a million other clerks. He smiled pleasantly as he greeted them, made some amusing remark, and wisely devoted his attention to Chris.

Chris, without meaning to be wise, introduced him to a number of girls and left him with them, while he himself returned to the only girl Ffolliott wished to be left with.

From the open doors of the ballroom, saxophone, cymbals, piccolo and drum beat to the wailing of the violins. The salon became a kaleidoscope, and figures moved, paired and passed; pierrots and pierrettes, clowns and columbines, cowboys and milkmaids, highwaymen and gypsies, gladiator and Persian slave.

With little black head upon bare white shoulder, she moved, and swayed, and dreamed, while saxophone, cymbals, piccolo and drum beat to the wailing of the violins.

"Oh, Chris . . . darling . . . isn't it perfect?"

"Perfect . . . and, darling, how soft and warm you are."

A piece of White Cargo drifted past, holding a tall, lithe figure dressed as Night, in shimmering black draperies that waved and clung, and lost their blackness against pale limbs.

"Do you know that couple?" murmured Ffolliott.

The pale, bored face, so near his own, turned languidly

from his shoulder. There was a faint lift of the attenuated black eyebrows, a slight curl of the vermilion lips.

"Babe Goolan and some boy she's found. I hardly know her, she came the term before I left."

"They're engaged, aren't they?"

"Some say engaged—some say merely occupied. They run a flat somewhere—*ménage à deux*."

Over the décolleté back, Ffolliott was staring absently at the orchestra. At the end of the first number, he left his partner and went out through the salon to the passage beyond. Mechanically he lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets, eyes moody. "*Ménage à deux*"—was it possible? He ran quickly over all the data he had. The sister was married now, and he lived alone—bed-sitting-room or something. And she was an artist—or learning to be one—learning other things too, perhaps. He never said much about her—never talked of getting married—didn't behave a bit like the average fellow who was in love with a girl. Of course, there were her parents down at Okebourne, but Okebourne was a good few miles away, and he never went there for week-ends now, not like he used to.

And then, suddenly, he remembered the suitcase that appeared in Batten & Trench's each Saturday morning.

Still, he was not quite convinced. Unconsciously, he had idealized Chris—seen in him what he might have been himself, if it had not been for something that had sent him from the English Club to the "stews."

Crushing out his cigarette, he returned to the ballroom. Between each dance he talked to them, but each dance they danced together. And then they all went to the annexe for refreshments, and Ffolliott was introduced to Pender and Cilla Roque. Chris approved of Pender these days. Pender had the right attitude to copra, hemp, and sugar, and if he dressed madly, it was a pleasanter dress than the sleek,

curved waistcoats of the Stock Exchange. Pender was interested in Chris's book too—as interested as one egoist can ever be in the work of another. And Pender could talk, and reduce civilization to its component parts—one part Art, and a million parts dirt. And more than all Pender's virtues was one quite recently acquired. He had found in Cilla Roque a substitute for Babe.

Cilla Roque was a rather intellectual blonde, but she was more blonde than intellectual, and the blonde in her made her forget her intellect at times, and then she would laugh, and become suddenly very pretty.

The four of them got on very well together. They had early put the universe into liquidation, appointing everyone over the age of forty as official receivers. Thereafter, they had discussed the things that mattered—Pender's pictures, Chris's books, Babe's posters and Cilla's intellect. When together, they spoke cleverly and daringly. In pairs, they were alternately prosaic and passionate.

Now they were together and daring, forgetful of the piece of White Cargo, whose conversation was as conventional in the presence of women as it was frank in the presence of woman.

Ffolliott listened in amazement. They were discussing some novel that had been recently banned, and discussing the qualities that had led to its suppression. Ffolliott had read the book. He had made a point of getting it, as soon as it was banned. And after reading it he had expressed the opinion that it wasn't fit to read.

"I don't mind a smutty story," he had said, in that tone of faint self-depreciation which is the unconscious Pharisee's highest form of self-praise, "but I draw the line at smut in books. These damn authors think they can write anything."

And now he listened to a perfectly frank and quite

intelligent statement of exactly why the book should never have been banned.

He was not interested in the intelligence, but in the frankness. When the discussion finally finished, he had decided one thing. People who talked like that probably acted similarly. And just then he was more interested in actions than in words.

When they got back to the ballroom, he asked Babe for a dance. She glanced at him quickly, hesitated, and blinked.

"Just a minute," she said, and ran to Chris.

"Chris darling . . . what on earth shall I do? Ffolliott wants me to dance with him—and—well, darling . . . I'm frightfully bare . . . and of course I never thought of dancing with anyone else but you."

Chris frowned.

"It's most awkward, isn't it? I mean, you simply can't dance with anyone else—not in those things."

From the small raised dais came the rhythmic beat, and saxophone, cymbals, piccolo and drum answered the wailing of the violins.

"Ready, Miss Goolan?" said a voice. Between them stood the piece of White Cargo. Babe stared helplessly at Chris. He hesitated, frowned, coughed, and finally nodded.

And she was caught up in other arms and drifted away, and Chris stood staring helplessly, till she vanished in the sea of swaying bodies.

Ffolliott's mouth was parched and his head swam. She was so supple, so soft, so warm and so silent, and at each mad beat he felt her thighs brush his, and move, and brush again, while still the music pulsed and throbbed, and saxophone, cymbals, piccolo, and drum beat to the wailing of the violins.

And then he made his first essay. The arm that held her

contracted very gently, and the little tinsel shields flattened. There was no shrinking, only a rather matter-of-fact voice said:

"Would you mind frightfully, Mr. Ffolliott, if we didn't finish this number? I've danced every one, and I'm really beginning to lag a bit."

Instantly the pressure relaxed.

"Certainly," said Ffolliott, and led her back to Chris.

She did not dance the next number, but the next she did, with Chris.

"How did you get on with Ffolliott, Babe?"

She heard the note of anxiety in the voice, and wanted to express her doubts. But she did not. After all, they were only doubts, and Ffolliott was only a man, and Chris was at Batten & Trench's and could not afford to quarrel with him.

"Oh, quite well—but he can't dance as you do, darling."

And the little black head touched the bare white shoulder, as they moved and swayed and dreamed; while saxophone, cymbals, piccolo, and drum beat to the wailing of the violins.

At one forty-five the National Anthem was played and sung, and followed with hand-clapping and laughter, and tired sighs, and the shuffling of tired feet, and the ballroom became a kaleidoscope as figures moved, paired, and passed; pierrots and pierrettes, clowns and columbines, cowboys and milkmaids, highwaymen and gypsies, gladiator and Persian slave.

And behind them all a single figure walked slowly and alone—a piece of White Cargo.

In the street Ffolliott's car waited.

"Come along," he said. "I'll drop you both at your doors—which comes first?"

They stood beneath a tall lamp-standard, but Ffolliott

had his back to the light. Beneath the shade of the pith helmet he saw them hesitate and colour faintly.

"Thanks awfully," said Chris hurriedly, "but we're only a stone's throw away—er—both of us."

Babe intervened.

"Oh, but if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Ffolliott—just go to my place first. Chris changed there, and he's got his suitcase to pick up."

They got in and the car drove off. Babe chatted about the dance and Ffolliott chatted too. Chris was silent.

As the car stopped, she said ;

"Can you wait a minute, Mr. Ffolliott, and drop Chris at his rooms? "

"Of course."

They vanished into the building.

"Damn and blast!" said Chris. "Now I've got to sleep in the beastly bed-sitting-room."

She laughed softly.

"You guileless cherub! Take your empty suitcase back with you and when he's gone just walk back again."

"Darling! "

Ten minutes later the car drew up at Morris Square.

"Good-night, Barrymore—thanks most awfully, I've thoroughly enjoyed it."

"So glad—good night! "

The door closed and the car drove away. At the exit from the square it stopped and Ffolliott jumped out.

"Just wait here a minute—I've forgotten something."

He walked quickly back, crossed to the farther side of the square, and tiptoed till he gained the shelter of the public garden.

Outside No. 87 was a street lamp that shone upon the door.

Ffolliott waited, and the door opened. A figure muffled

in a thick coat stood for an instant on the steps, the light shining upon a bare head encircled with a narrow purple file. The head turned right and left, and then footsteps sounded upon the pavement, grew fainter and fainter, and finally died away.

Ffolliott smiled and went back to his car.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BY the last week in May the book was finished. On the Friday, the last chapters came back from the type-writing bureau. A single sheet accompanied them, bearing the words :

THE TEMPTATIONS OF ST. TONY

by

CHRISTOPHER BARRYMORE

Illustrations by

B. GOOLAN

Chris laughed nervously.

“ Looks rather wonderful, doesn’t it, Babe? ”

She smiled and nodded, and then some quick emotion touched them both and they clung to one another, laughing unsteadily.

“ Let’s get it packed up and addressed, Chris darling, and we must register it too. You write the covering letter and I’ll just nip out and get some corrugated cardboard to pack it in.”

She was back in ten minutes and read the letter he had written.

“ Do fine, darling.”

Then they laughed and kissed, and packed the precious document, and addressed it in four different places—two on one side and two on the other—and sealed it with great daubs of red wax, and marked it with big blue lines in the sign of a cross. There was nothing else they could do to help it

on its perilous journey, except to register and post it, which they did. The callousness of the post office attendant seemed to them almost sacrilegious. He just tossed it on to the bench at the back, where it lay among a number of other registered parcels—a mere scrap, yet charged with all their hopes of happiness.

The next morning he told Ginn that the MS. had been sent off. He had formed the habit of telling Ginn most things that he had to tell someone and dared not tell everyone.

Ginn nodded and wheezed.

“Good!—er—eleven o’clock in the ‘Crown,’ friend? Must wet its journey.”

To Ffolliott Chris said nothing. In the last few months he had not said much to Ffolliott on any subject. Since the dance a mutual reticence had ruled them—Chris from uneasiness that Ffolliott might guess about the week-ends, and, guessing, misunderstand; Ffolliott for reasons too complex for him to analyse.

So the days dragged on and no news came of the book.

Chris knew it was absurd to expect a decision under a month, but that was a conclusion of the mind, and the heart just then was capable of expecting anything except failure.

The delay and uncertainty fretted and frayed him. Copra, hemp, and sugar became twice as intolerable as they had ever been; the City twice as big and busy, and callous and contemptuous. During those days he had much to thank Mr. Turnbull for. The old man had accepted him as a commercial failure: what else he found in him was his secret, hidden behind the watery old eyes and dome-like head. But in small ways he lightened Chris’s burden. On the fine days he found jobs for him to do outside—calls at the bank; errands to the Commercial Sale Rooms; and now and again, when it could be managed, a whole day at the Docks, where copra, hemp, and sugar ceased to be

senseless words in ledgers, and became magic products of the sun-filled East, dragged from the gloomy bowels of great ships and set down upon bustling quays, amid the rattle of donkey engines and derrick-ratchets, and the full-flavoured profanity of stevedores and lightermen.

But Mr. Turnbull was ailing. He had had his seventy-first birthday a week after Chris and Tiny had celebrated their twenty-first. The red nose was turning blue, the knotted old fingers were whitening and glazing. Now and again he would drop his pipe and spill his smouldering shag upon the immaculate sheets of his employers' ledgers.

Finally he dragged himself to the partners' room and confessed, in shame and humiliation, that his doctor had insisted upon his taking a fortnight's holiday.

Mr. John received him graciously.

"Certainly, Mr. Turnbull, we can't afford to have you ill—er—who can do your work while you are away?"

That point was settled without difficulty: settled so easily, indeed, that it unsettled Mr. Turnbull. Fifty years' indispensability was resolving into a trifling rearrangement of the staff. Ffolliott would mount the stool the old man had believed to be unmountable by anyone except himself.

Chris watched him hobble back to his stool.

"Poor old ——!" muttered Ginn. "No one will be sorry if he snuffs it."

"Eh?" exclaimed Chris. "Why—he's not disliked."

"True, friend, but if he dies everyone gets a move up. Pity—but there it is. When you're an old —— you're in the way."

It was a Tuesday, and Mr. Turnbull was to start his holidays on the Saturday. He mumbled a lot about not knowing how he was to get things straight before he went, but no one heeded him. Ffolliott wanted him to hurry up

and go. The sooner he was gone, the sooner Ffolliott could demonstrate that he could do the job as well.

On the Thursday the old man shuffled across to Chris.

"Doing anything to-morrow evening, Barrymore?"

Chris thought rapidly. He was seeing Babe, of course, but they were only just going to read and talk a little, and kiss, and wonder whether the book was accepted.

"No, sir," he said.

"Say if you are—because it's only some work I want done—and it's for myself—to get straight before I go—so you're not bound to stop if you don't want to."

"I'll be pleased to, sir," said Chris.

"Right—er—thanks." He shuffled back to his stool and peered again into the pages of his hempen Bible.

Babe understood.

"Poor old ghost!" she said, sighing, and then they thought of happier things.

They dined that night at Clym's. It was Chris's first entry into literary circles, and the dinner had been given to give him the chance of meeting the people he had always wanted to meet.

But it was a failure. There was a young novelist with a growing reputation, and a middle-aged novelist whose reputation had ceased growing. There was a quite famous woman, whose work Chris knew well and admired ardently. But the conversation disarmed him within five minutes. It was point and tierce on a plane that left him with eyes uplifted and heart in his boots. He hardly spoke at all. His articles in *The Moderate* seemed fatuous; *The Temptations of St. Tony* a piece of callow assertiveness.

Both Babe and Clym did their utmost to draw him, but he sat, mute and shy, and utterly miserable.

And then, when the guests had gone, he became intensely voluble.

Clym sighed.

"Why the devil waste this on us—when you had the chance of using it on them?"

"I hadn't the nerve."

Clym stood up.

"Peter Pan," he said gravely, "you want a holiday."

In the bed-sitting-room that night, Chris lay in the darkness and shrank from life. He had failed himself, and was left a timorous little nonentity, without pride or personality.

He slept badly and woke with morning to a mood of lassitude and depression. And then the postman came. Mrs. Welland brought the parcel in and left him alone again. He sat staring at the clumsily tied string and hasty wrapping of brown paper. One corner was torn and a spot of white showed. Listlessly, he cut the string and opened the paper. It was the manuscript, hurriedly packed, with chapters out of order and title-page tucked away in the middle.

On the top was a neat, printed rejection slip, bearing the name: "Pemberton & Baum, Publishers, 203 Golden Lane, W.C." He read the courteously worded insult and left the house without eating his breakfast.

As soon as Babe opened the door she saw the news in his eyes, but she said nothing. She just led him into the sitting-room and ran out again to get him a cup of tea. And while he sipped he told her, and she undid the parcel and sorted out the chapters.

"Aren't you going to the office, Chris boy?"

"No. . . 'Phone up and say I'm not well."

She passed him a cigarette and lit it for him, and watched him as he sat staring out of the window at the blue June sky.

"I think I would, Chris—you'll only mope if you don't."

He did not answer.

"And, Chris—you've got to help old Turnbull out this evening."

"Damn old Turnbull!"

"And I've got to take this MS. round to Clym."

"Eh?"

He swung round sharply.

"Well," she said, smiling, "you don't suppose Pemberton & Baum's opinion is worth much, do you? Some rotten little passman just down from Oxford has probably read it, and sat on it because he can't write himself."

She jumped up and kissed him.

"Come on, darling—this won't help us to be butterflies."

He caught her to him, and for a while they neither spoke nor moved. And then he looked at her and smiled—albeit a little wanly.

"You are a darling!" he said.

He was a quarter of an hour late at Batten & Trench's, but he looked tired and miserable enough to substantiate his story that he was not well.

Mr. Turnbull eyed him uneasily.

"Be all right for to-night, Barrymore? If not—say so."

"Quite all right, sir."

The little watery eyes blinked.

"Heard any news of the book?"

Chris stared. He had not even guessed that the old man knew he wrote, far less that he had completed a novel.

"Rejected, sir," he said.

"Humph!—Never mind—you're only twenty-one—I'm over seventy . . . and rejected too!"

A queer, grim little smile moved the blueish lips, and seeing it, Chris smiled too. He got through the day somehow, and at six-thirty the office emptied, save for himself and Mr. Turnbull.

In Unity Square, the sun shone slantwise, smudging the

dirty warehouses with a golden dust. In a few weeks, he would be twenty-two, and a year ago he had been waiting to go to Poltire. Twelve months—and no nearer anything. And the sea would be rolling in to Tregasket Cove now, and the light would be upon Poltire Head. And the cave would be dry, and the pool of water green and cool, and on the cliffs the gorse would be in blossom, and little yellow butterflies would be dancing and dipping, and settling and loving.

"We'll take the copra ledger first, Barrymore."

Chris started and slid off his stool. Grasping the great leather ledger, he staggered to the old man's desk.

"Thank'ee—and—here's some cigarettes . . . keep 'em—I smoke a pipe."

He thrust a box of a hundred Gold Flake ungraciously towards Chris. Chris opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Turnbull spoke first.

"One hundred tons No. 1 Cebu sun-dried Copra, per s.s. *Volcanic*. Just tick it in red ink—in the last column—neatly."

And so for some hours was no sound but the old voice calling, answered by the young. In Unity Square the light was failing. The warehouses had turned ashen. The office seemed very big now, with all the desks empty save one, whereon the old man bent and peered beneath the green shade of the electric light, into the books that held a record of his life's work in row upon row of neat small figures, sloping like himself, but, like himself, firm with the integrity of a life's devotion to a single idea.

"Hungry, Barrymore?"

"Just a bit, sir."

"We'll have some supper—you'll have it with me."

They passed out into the dusky twilight of the June night. The City was quieter now—quieter and more dignified. The glass windows of empty offices shone

opaquely in the failing light—blackness within, as of a tomb.

They had supper in a small coffee-house in a lane between two wealthy streets: cold game pie and a tankard of bitter, and bread and cheese, and a big cup of steaming coffee.

Mr. Turnbull lit his pipe.

"Smoke!" he said gruffly, as though he were ordering Chris to enter a consignment of copra. Chris smoked obediently.

"Good place, this," muttered Mr. Turnbull. "But haven't been here for thirty years—used to lunch here regularly when I was single—too expensive when I married."

He seemed to expect no answer, so Chris made none, other than a nod. He felt that the old man was in retrospective vein. All he wanted was someone to talk to—someone who would listen without answering.

The nose had lost a little of its blueness and the lips had found colour. The watery blue eyes looked less rheumy. The glazed flesh of the cheeks was suffused with a slight flush.

"I don't know when I've enjoyed me food as much as I have to-night," muttered Mr. Turnbull, his old black pipe dancing to the movement of his almost toothless jaws.

"It was very good, sir."

The dome-like head turned.

"You know, Barrymore, now it's come to it, I'm looking forward to the holiday—been a fool to go without one all these years.—No one thinks any more of you for it—not a bit."

He shook his head and a cascade of incandescent shag fell upon his crumpled black coat and baggy trousers. He picked up a knife and used the handle to push down the glowing tobacco.

"Going to Eastbourne—just my wife and me—spent our honeymoon there."

The word flashed into Chris's brain. This queer old

man had had a honeymoon, had known love and kisses, and soft limbs, and laughter, and sun and sea.

Mr. Turnbull was muttering again.

"Been lucky in one thing—my wife—never complained once—not all the forty years we've been married, and we've had our troubles, like everyone else."

He paused, and resumed:

"But there's not much in it—not when you look back. A lot of worry, a lot of work, and not much thanks—not that thanks are much use, anyway."

"You had a family, sir?"

"Yes, three of them—all boys. All doing well—better than I've done—still, that's as it should be—no one's much good who can't do better than his father."

He turned suddenly and stared at Chris, the black pipe wavering between the colourless lips.

"Barrymore—leave that place while you can. It's no good to anybody. It's been no good to me, and it's not your sort o' work. It'll make you middle-aged at thirty and old at forty, and . . . well, look at me at seventy-one . . . you needn't shake your head—I know." He fumbled suddenly with his watch-chain and held out a small medallion.

"Read that," he said.

Chris read:

"James Turnbull. Amateur Champion All England. Quarter-mile, half and mile. 1880-1883. Mid-Essex Amateur Athletic Association."

Mr. Turnbull tugged the medallion away again, as though afraid Chris might detach it from the chain.

"I hadn't your brain, Barrymore—for you've got a brain—no good at figures, but . . . I've read your articles in *The Moderate*—Ginn told me, so I bought it—not in my line, but they're clever—cleverer than figure work. I hadn't your brain, but I'd your body—those days. Take my

advice—chuck it—Batten & Trench, I mean. When I started, I was like you. If you stay, when you finish you'll be like me."

He coughed, and blew a shower of hot ash onto his coat and baggy trousers.

"Miss!—bill, please!" he muttered, and stood up.

And almost at once he sat down again.

"Phew!—it's got very hot, hasn't it? Indigestion, I suppose—asked for it—haven't eaten such a big meal for years."

He wiped his forehead with a red bandana, rose again more carefully this time, and shuffled towards the cash desk.

It was nine-thirty as they climbed their stools again and began the endless iteration of copra, hemp, and sugar. They sat side by side, both preoccupied, sharing the illumination of a single light capped with a green shade, bald head and curly head softly radiant. In the dim hinterland of empty desks and stools, and unlit lamps, and files, and trays, and ledgers, two shadows upon the wall wavered and moved, dodging each other between two massive safes with great brass knobs, like protruding eyes, that stared blindly out of darkness into light.

"Tired, Barrymore?"

"Not a bit, sir."

"I am—dead tired."

"Why not leave it, sir? I'll give Ffolliott a hand with the rest of it to-morrow afternoon."

"Ptah! Ffolliott!—A fine mess these books'll be in when I come back!"

And then he sighed, and shivered, and leant against Chris; and the pen fell out of his hand and left a great smudge of red ink on the immaculate ledger.

"I feel . . . ill . . . Barrymore."

Chris staggered from his stool, his arms about the crumpled old black coat.

"All right, sir—I've got you——"

The old man sighed again, and the frayed whiskers brushed Chris's cheeks.

And then Chris picked him up bodily. It was not a difficult task. The old body was hardly heavier than the copra ledger.

"Put me down . . . I . . . I can walk . . ."

For the first time, Chris disobeyed Mr. Turnbull. Without answering, he carried him across the dim office, kicked open the partners' door with his foot, switched on the light with one finger, and set him down in the big leather arm-chair that stood beside Mr. John's desk.

It was sacrilege. No one ever sat down in the partners' room, except the partners, and other partners who did business with Batten & Trench. But Chris did not worry about sacrilege. The old man lay crumpled up, arms lolling over the chair arms, chin on his chest, face ashen white, and eyes staring dazedly at Mr. John's desk.

"Barrymore . . . this . . . is wrong . . . partners' room."

Chris was busy undoing the collar and waistcoat.

The old man sighed, and a great bead of sweat rolled off the dome-like forehead and settled in the frayed moustache.

"I won't be a second, sir—I'll just get the night-watchman to 'phone for a doctor."

He found the night-watchman, and ran out to the "Crown" for brandy. When he got back to the partners' room, Mr. Turnbull had slipped out of the chair, and lay on the floor. The eyes were open, and the jaw had dropped. Chris recognized the undignified puppetry of the lolling head and vacant eyes.

And then the doctor came, followed a few minutes later

by a policeman. The night-watchman made the fourth in the violated sanctuary of the partners' room.

Chris stared out of the window. The sooty walls of the warehouse rose stark against a sky of pallid stars. Vaguely he heard voices speaking, a pause, and then the gruff voice of the policeman.

"We'll take him to the mortuary, sir, and 'phone the local police to advise the next o' kin."

Chris swung round.

"You can't do that!"

The three men stared at him and he began to stammer.

"I mean—she's old—and they were going away to-morrow—for a holiday . . . together. You . . . you can't just send a policeman to say . . . he's dead."

The policeman rubbed his chin.

"It's the regulations. She must view the body."

There was a pause, and they looked at Chris again. He took a step forward and paused, shyly, yet with a certain stubbornness about the lips.

"I know where she lives . . . let me go . . . I can tell her—better than a policeman. And I'll bring her to—to the mortuary—I will, really . . . it won't take more than an hour, there and back."

The policeman glanced at the doctor—the doctor at the dead man.

"Can I . . . Doctor? She's over seventy . . . and—well, can I?"

The doctor turned to the policeman.

"I'll take responsibility."

"Thanks awfully!" said Chris, and ran out of the office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I

IT was past one when Chris reached Chelsea. The night was warm, starlit and silent, save for the sound of his own footfalls in the echoing street.

He walked rapidly, past the turning to Morris Square and on towards Fulham. He could not face the bed-sitting-room just then. He must see her, touch her, renew contact with life, after so close a contact with death.

He ran up the stairs, latchkey ready in his hand, and all his tiredness and depression had vanished.

He opened the door and called her name, softly at first, then louder. But there was no answer. She was asleep, he told himself, and gently opened the bedroom door. All was quiet—too quiet. No soft breathing, no little restless movement to tell him that she lay there in her bed. He switched on the light. The room was empty. The bed had not been slept in. He ran to his own room, but that was empty too. Then she must be at Morris Square. She must be there, because he must see and touch her, and know that she was still alive and young, and waiting for him.

He ran out, leaving all the lights burning. The front door slammed, and his footfalls echoed down the stairs. She could only come one way from Morris Square—if she were there. And she was there—she must be—there was nowhere else she could be. He set off at a jog-trot. It was

easier just then to run than to walk the interminable distance that seemed so short when she was with him.

He met nobody, heard nothing, save his own footfalls in the echoing street. It was as though he were the last person alive—quite alone in a huge derelict city of gaunt black buildings—empty—dead.

Panic took him as he ran, and he found himself muttering:

“Babe, darling! Babe—where have you gone?”

And then he heard other footfalls and stopped abruptly. They were the footfalls of someone who was running too. But he could see no one in that huge derelict city of gaunt black buildings, empty and dead. He wanted to call her name, and was afraid that it would not be her—and to call and get no answer was worse than not to call at all.

The line of street-lamps stretched away into obscurity, each casting a little pool of light upon the pavement. A figure showed for an instant—very small, like a little moth fluttering in the light of a candle—and vanished again. From light to light it flitted, now seen—now lost in the blackness between each lamp.

And then he heard her crying, and found his voice and called her name in the dark echoing street.

“Babe, darling!”

And a wavering little voice answered:

“Oh, Chris!—I thought you were dead!”

He ran, and they met in the dark shadow of tall buildings—alone in the heart of that vast, derelict city.

“Oh, Chris—just hold me . . . that’s right, darling . . . Chris . . . I . . . I thought you’d been killed. Oh, don’t move . . . darling . . . it’s so wonderful . . . to . . . to feel you.”

The dark portico of a great dark house invited them, and they sat down upon the steps, and sighed gratefully, and

were quite alone, and loved the silence and solitude of the vast derelict city.

"I . . . I thought you'd been run over, Chris, and . . . oh, I've been backwards and forwards four times . . . in case each time you were . . . there, and I was here . . . you know what I mean, darling—that you weren't where I was . . .

"And I went to the flat, and you weren't there—and . . . I thought—well, I don't know what I thought, but——"

After a little while, he explained.

"And it was eleven before I got the poor old thing back to Blackheath again. And, Babe . . . I'll never laugh at old people again . . . it's too terrible—old age."

She nodded, and leaned her head against his shoulder, and they both stared up from beneath the portico at the velvet sky, star-spangled.

"Isn't it wonderful, sitting here, Chris?"

"Absolutely wonderful!"

Something soft and warm brushed her leg, and a faint "mew" sounded. She felt in the darkness and touched the soft fur of a kitten.

"Oh, Chris—strike a match."

He obeyed, and the tiny flame lit up a little ball of fur, lit by two little blue eyes, shot with green in the light of the match.

"Oh, Chris—it's quite black—that means good luck." She picked it up and kissed it.

"Poor wee thing—have you lost your muv'er?" she murmured, and pressed the warm body against her cheek. The match went out.

But they still sat there in the silence and the warm darkness, and the kitten purred sleepily, and they grew sleepy too, in the vast solitude of that great derelict city.

"You're coming back with me to-night, aren't you, Chris darling?"

"Of course, darling—I must—I can't bear you out of my sight to-night. It's silly, but——"

"'Tisn't silly, darling—it's sweet."

A faint sigh fluttered in the darkness, and their lips met.

A beam of light flashed on their faces, and they drew apart hastily. Beyond the beam was a vague bulk, capped by a shadowy helmet.

Blue eyes and black blinked owlishly, and the kitten woke and blinked too.

"'Ell-lo!"

The voice was deep, the intonation that of one type only—a London policeman faced by something unusual and possibly felonious.

Babe smiled wanly.

"Er—good evening!" she murmured.

There was a cough—a deep, authoritative cough, indicative of an increasing sense of personal majesty. Chris sensed the implication of that cough and intervened hurriedly.

"We missed the last 'bus and had to walk, and we're tired—so we sat down—but we're just going, and—we live quite close."

He stood up, and Babe stood up with him, and the kitten mewed into the dazzling light of the torch.

"I see—well—if I was you, I'd go 'ome quick—ter bed—you're out quite late enough for young 'uns."

Babe nodded meekly. Then she smiled.

"Constable—er—what's the law about finding kittens?"

"Kittens?"

"Yes—this one!"

She held it out, and it mewed into the policeman's face.

"Eh?—er—where d'yer find it?"

"Well, I didn't find it—it found us. But if I give you my address, can I take it home and keep it till it's claimed?"

There was a pause.

"Well—that's the law."

He dived for his pocket-book.

"Can I hold your light, officer?" enquired Chris politely.

Again there was a pause, and then a rather jerky:

"Right-o!"

The torch changed hands and shone upon a face beneath a helmet—a clean-shaven face, with lips struggling to preserve their majesty.

The address was noted, and the torch changed hands again.

"If it ain't claimed—well, you can keep it."

"Oh, can I, constable?—Oh, thank you so much!"

Chris whispered something to the policeman. There was a deep cough:

"Well, sir—of course—thank you, sir. Good night, sir. Good night, miss."

"Good night!" they answered in unison, and walked away.

"Babe!"

"Yes, darling?"

"Never call them 'constable'—always 'officer.'"

"Why, darling?"

"'Constable's' *démodé*."

In the sitting-room was bright light and hot coffee, and two heads, golden and black, close together, just visible above the back of the couch. On the hearthrug was the kitten, lapping milk drunkenly.

"Babe—why did you go round to Morris Square? You didn't expect me to-night, did you?"

There was silence, and a slight sigh. And then she stood up and faced him, her shoulders against the mantelpiece.

"I didn't mean to tell you, Chris, but I must—now—after thinking you were killed, and . . . finding you."

She knelt down and sat back on her heels, and held the

kitten in both hands, and rubbed her chin against the small black head.

"Chris—if I tell you—promise . . . you . . . you won't be silly and have a frightful row."

"Row?—with you?"

"No, darling—with—er—you promise?"

"Babe—what's happened?"

"Promise, Chris!"

"I can't until I know—what's happened."

She sighed.

"Ffolliott's been here."

He stared at her.

"Ffolliott!—What on earth for?"

She laughed awkwardly.

"Because the man's a fool, and can't see when two people love each other. Just a minute, darling—I'll tell you everything. Of course, he's not entirely to blame—because—well, he doesn't understand people like us, and he just concluded that—that you and I were butterflies—at week-ends—so, of course, he thought he stood a chance. Chris, darling—don't look so fierce—because he didn't get much change out of me—and let me tell you all of it before you start breaking up the furniture."

The mischief in her eyes softened the battle-gleam in his.

"He came about six, and was quite decent, at first—and quite plausible—said he'd never thanked me for the dance and he happened to be this way, so he thought he'd just look in and thank me. I confess I was a bit suspicious—I mean, I've never quite liked Ffolliott—although, funnily enough, I like him better now, because he was a gentleman in the end, after he'd tried to be a cad."

"What did he do?—Damn everything else!"

"Well—finally he caught me unawares. I was getting him a spot of supper—he'd been quite decent and sensible,

and I wanted to keep on the right side of him—because he could make things rotten for you at the office. But of course—he's got no sense. He just thought that as I was quite natural with him—he could be . . . quite natural—with me. He caught me from the back—put his arms round me—mine inside. I told him not to be a fool—quietly—I didn't want to quarrel if I could help it—because of Batten & Trench—but—well, I had to, because he was really quite unpleasant."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Babe—tell me. I must know."

"Well—he—er—he touched my breasts—Chris darling!—"

He jumped up—his face very white.

"What an utter swine!"

She stood up quickly.

"Listen—Chris dear. It was only for a second . . . because I just saw red. I . . . I bent forward and then brought my head back with all my might. It really was rather ghastly—I—nearly broke his nose, and . . . I had to get an old sheet to . . . to stop it bleeding."

"Good! Good!—But . . . why on earth did you stop his nose bleeding?"

"Oh, I had to, Chris—he looked so ghastly. I don't mean the blood . . . but so utterly sick—like a dog that's been kicked hard. And when it was all over, and he was eating his supper——"

"You gave him supper!"

"I thought it was best, Chris—he was quite tamed, and I wanted to get things right between you and him, because while you're at Batten & Trench's you can't afford to quarrel with him."

"Rubbish!—the man's an utter swine!"

But she made him sit down, and kissed him, and talked quietly, and slowly the whole episode took on its true proportions, and Ffolliott shrank out of the picture, leaving only her.

It was half-past two when they said good night, but at three, Chris was out of bed again and knocking at her door.

There was a moment's silence, and her head appeared.

"Yes, darling?"

"Babe . . . I . . . let me come in for a minute."

She let him in and slipped back into bed, sitting up with the clothes drawn round her waist, arms and shoulders bare, above the embroidery of a little pink silk nightdress. The kitten lay curled up on the pink silk eiderdown.

He sat on the end of the bed, and smoked for some minutes in silence.

"Babe—let's get married!" he said suddenly.

The black eyes sparkled, and the small hands met together over the strip of embroidery.

"Chris darling!—Why, of course!"

He laughed and slipped round to the bedside, and she met him with outstretched arms.

"We'll manage, somehow, Babe—and we can't go on like this . . . with swine like Ffolliott—interfering, and . . . poor old Turnbull dying."

"Of course we can't, darling . . . and, oh, I don't know, but somehow I feel . . . that it'll be easier when we're married—we'll be able to help each other so much more—and not be miserable—because . . . oh, well, anyway, darling—we will marry—right away——"

A sigh sounded.

There was silence.

"Babe, darling . . . I . . . begin to feel we are married—I'd better go."

And he went, hurriedly.

II

The next day was Saturday, and they met outside 101 Unity Square. It was just one-thirty and everything was mapped out.

He gave her the news over a quick lunch in a Lyons' café. They had already started to economize.

Ffolliott had not turned up, and Chris had done no work. It had been all interviews with the partners, with the staff, and with the police. He would have to attend the inquest on Monday.

"I'm just waiting to see what they do for Mrs. Turnbull," he added, as they finished their coffee.

"Oh, they'll pension her, surely?"

"I wonder!"

They took a 'bus to Chelsea, found the register office, and after some uneasy whispering, entered. They had to give three weeks' notice, the clerk told them, unless they wished to pay for a special licence. They enquired the price of a special licence, and sighed. In the end they gave three weeks' notice.

"After all, darling," said Babe, as they emerged into the sunshine, "there's quite a lot to do, and in three weeks' time—your book will be accepted."

"Quite," said Chris.

They took the next 'bus to Kensington, and spent the afternoon in the Gardens, discussing details.

Chris had paper and pencil, and they worked out three separate budgets. Budget "A" was based on things as they were; "B," on the situation if the book were accepted; and "C," if the book were rejected, but Chris got a better job.

"That covers everything, doesn't it?" he said thoughtfully.

"No—nothing like—they're the three most difficult. I

mean—there's your articles, and odd commissions for me, and Father will make my allowance up to a hundred and twenty—he said he would when I married.”

Chris looked doubtful.

“ I rather wish we were telling him, Babe.”

“ So do I—but we can't, darling, because he'd say ‘ no ’—now let's have tea.”

There only remained one thing to arrange, and that was Chris's leave for the honeymoon. The cottage at Poltore would be empty from the end of June. Tiny and Bill were already down there, and the family did not go till the end of July. There were only Clym and Elaine to consider, and neither cared much when they went. On Monday, therefore, Chris was to see if he could change with Bolt, who was taking his fortnight from the 1st of July.

But on Monday, Bolt was down at the Docks, and Chris was at the coroner's court, and on Tuesday something else intervened to prevent Chris's asking.

For on Tuesday he turned up suddenly at the flat, just as Babe was sitting down to lunch.

She heard him close the front door and jumped up excitedly. But as he came in she met his eyes uneasily.

For his expression puzzled her. There was dejection in the set of the lips, yet somehow the eyes did not tally. They were not eager, but they were certainly not sorrowful.

“ What's the matter, Chris? ”

“ I'm sacked ! ”

For an instant there was silence, and then suddenly she laughed, a little uneasily, but infectiously, for he laughed too, and then tried to look very grave.

“ You know—it's no laughing matter, Babe—not really, although—— ” he suddenly stretched his arms above his head. “ Thank God—there'll be no more copra, hemp, and sugar ! ”

"Amen!" she echoed fervently.

And then they both laughed again.

"Of course, we're going to get married just the same, Babe?"

She nodded vigorously.

"Of course, darling. And . . . why are you sacked?"

"Oh, yes—I haven't told you, have I? Let's sit down."

They sat down.

"It was over old Mrs. Turnbull. I heard this morning what they're doing for her," he swung round suddenly. "Babe—would you credit it?—They're giving her fifty pounds as a gratuity, and not a penny pension."

"Oh, Chris—what perfectly phenomenal cads!"

"Yes—that's how I felt about it when I saw her come out of their room—poor old thing—she wears a bonnet, Babe, so you can guess how old she is. But she's the sweetest old thing imaginable, and she's got the pluck of ten men. She's got a queer, lined old face, and a mouth that must have been very pretty when she was young—it's just patient now—damnably patient, in a way that made me swallow great lumps, when I saw her kiss poor old Turnbull—in the mortuary. And when I saw her walk out, and knew the pittance they've given her, after the old man doing just on fifty years with them, I saw red. I just walked into the partners' room—of course it was frightful bad manners and rather cheaply dramatic, but at the time I didn't think so. I started all right—quite polite—of course, it was awful cheek—but I put it quite decently—about his service and the fact that she'd no money at all. Mr. James was out and it was that old brute John, and he must have had a rotten conscience or he'd have just told me to go to hell. But he didn't—he was furious, but he made excuses—and what do you think they were?—That she'd got sons to keep her!"

"Good Lord!—How perfectly poisonous!"

"That's what I thought—and I nearly said it—only I tried to behave—I didn't quite manage it—I—er—said it was a damn scandal. That rather jerked things. He rang for Skillan—and Skillan wrote out a cheque for a month's salary, and the old man signed it. Even in that, he acted true to himself. He wasn't going to write out his own cheque, even when he was in a temper—and he was in a temper—quite a real one."

As he finished, she looked at him, the red lips twitching.

"You're a darling," she said suddenly, and kissed him.

Chris brought out the cheque.

"Better go to hidden reserves—eh?"

She smiled and murmured "Of course," and with elegantly posed finger and thumb she lifted the hem of her skirt.

"The left one, darling."

Chris closed his eyes.

"Lead us not into temptation."

"But we must save, mustn't we, darling?"

Chris opened his eyes.

"True," he said, and folded the cheque neatly. "Damn the kitten!"

He jumped up, with the small, black, furry body clinging to his neck with little feline claws. Babe sighed, and powdered her nose.

They decided to call on Clym.

"I've not really started my lunch properly," she said, "and you've had none, and we'll just catch Clym and make him take us to the 'Cloches de Corneville.' After all, darling, it's over a year since you lost a job, so we must celebrate it."

"Quite," said Chris, and added: "By the way—are we telling Clym—about the marriage, I mean?"

She paused in the act of putting on her hat, arms raised, black eyes smiling from beneath the small brim.

"Shall we?"

"Let's!—He can't do anything to stop us—and he won't try."

They went to the office of *The Moderate*. Clym was surrounded with papers and smoke. They stood facing him with their hands on his desk, for a whole minute before he deigned to notice them.

"A slight impression of an absorbed Editor," said Babe.

"Talk of the devil——" answered Clym, looking up.

"Who's been talking of us?" demanded Chris.

Clym searched languidly among his papers, dug out a letter, and passed it nonchalantly across the table. They scrambled for it and nearly tore it in half before they compromised by holding it together, like two good little children sharing a prayer-book.

It was from Lawrence Curnick, of Curnick & Webb, Publishers.

"DEAR GOOLAN,

"I've finished reading *The Temptations of St. Tony*, not solely because you asked me to be as quick as I could. The principal reason for my speed has been the book itself. I could not put it down until I'd finished it. Of course we're taking it, subject to a few minor alterations which I've mentioned in a letter to the two infant prodigies. For I've had to include the lady, because I want her illustrations. They really are extraordinarily good.

"I've asked them to call to-morrow, and I confess to a quite unprofessional sense of anticipation. But I will remember your warning and try not to appear too emotional in their presence.

Yours ever,

LAWRENCE CURNICK."

"A spot of 'alc,' for God's sake!" muttered Chris.

"Two spots, Clym darling—my knees are knocking."

"Shall we make it three?" said Clym, "my arm's shaking."

He went to a small cabinet. Chris and Babe had subsided on a leather couch.

"Ahem!" said Clym. "May I turn round?"

"Round and round till you're black in the face!" cried Chris. "And, Clym—you've got to come out to lunch with us—we're celebrating."

"Of course," said Clym, and returned with three glasses of water.

"Eh?—What's that stuff?" exclaimed Chris.

"A comparatively rare liquid which, when aerated with certain gases, is used to weaken whisky. There is, however, no whisky kept on the premises."

Babe turned to Chris.

"Did you expect it, in the offices of *The Moderate*?"

Chris jumped up.

"I know where they grow whisky—come on!"

Babe nudged him and he coughed.

"Oh, by the way, Clym—we're getting married on the 28th."

Clym's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, yes?"

"Honest!" said Babe, nodding. "We've given notice at the register office."

Clym sat on the edge of the table, one leg swinging.

"Of course—you'll cancel that. If you must be married, it must be at St. Cyprian's." He spoke reflectively.

"Why?" exclaimed Babe.

Clym felt for his cigarette case, opened it with deliberation, selected a cigarette, and lit it.

Then he spoke to the ceiling.

"I suppose you'd be pretty sick, both of you, if, when

the book's published, Father wouldn't read it, or look at the illustrations? "

The two looked uneasy.

" Well—naturally," said Chris.

Clym ceased looking at the ceiling, and looked at them.

" Well then, remember this, both of you—your writing—and your painting—they're your religion. Christianity is Father's. Even if you don't care much about it—pay him the courtesy you ask of him."

Chris blushed scarlet.

" Frightfully sorry, Clym—of course."

He glanced at Babe.

She nodded vigorously.

" Of course," she said. " Sorry, Clym ! "

Clym stood up.

" Shall we celebrate? "

They laughed joyously, and each took one of his arms.

Chris was unlucky, and there was a thud on the floor.

" Er—sorry, Clym—it's come off ! "

Clym glanced down.

" It does, sometimes," he said.

In the street, they broke the news a second time.

" By the way, Clym—I've got the sack."

Clym nodded.

" Yes—I've heard, from Uncle Joe."

" Have you really?—I say—er—I'm frightfully sorry—about Uncle Joe, I mean."

" Uncle Joe isn't—he's immensely relieved."

" And, anyway," interposed Babe, " it doesn't matter two hoots now—the book's accepted."

" Quite ! " said Clym.

" Well, it doesn't—does it? " said Chris earnestly.

Clym looked at the sky.

" *La jeunesse n'a qu'un temps!* " he murmured.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I

MR. GOOLAN sipped his tea thoughtfully. It was not an afternoon to induce hasty actions, either mental or physical. The old vicarage seemed to be dozing among the whispering wisteria. St. Cyprian's struck the hour so lazily that it seemed doubtful if it would ever reach the fourth beat before it fell asleep. The only bird singing was a blackbird, and even his song was a perfunctory, half-hearted affair of little broken trills and long sleepy pauses. In the valley, the river was trying to make itself heard, and now and again a little limpid note gurgled, only to be hushed by the soft breathing of the beech leaves.

Mr. Goolan set his cup down.

"Well, Clym," he said, "I must admit that I am relying entirely on your judgment in this matter, for it does seem to me to be quite the most irresponsible and improvident marriage I was ever called upon to solemnize."

"But Chris is such a dear boy," murmured Mrs. Goolan.

"Quite a dear boy," echoed Mr. Goolan, "but rather an expensive one."

"But——" began Elaine, when Clym intervened.

"I don't think it's quite as mad as it looks, Father. With any luck, Chris should be able to knock up about a hundred a year—writing. With good luck—that is, if this book 'goes'—he may treble that figure. But take it at a hundred——"

He paused, and jotted down "£100" on the back of an envelope.

"Babe earns that already, and may easily double it, if those illustrations of hers catch on—as they may, quite easily. But take it at a hundred——" He jotted down the figures.

"Now then—Chris has got seventy-five pounds per annum of his own, and Babe gets sixty pounds from you——"

He paused, but he only put down "£75" on the envelope.

Mr. Goolan looked dreamily at the old vicarage, sunning itself among the whispering wisteria.

"I suppose I shall have to make it up to a hundred and twenty," he said sighing.

"Quite," said Clym, and added "£120" to the little column of figures.

"That makes three hundred and ninety-five pounds per annum—a quite respectable income for two children to marry on. And, as a matter of fact, I'll probably be able to squeeze him into some publishing firm—not book publishers, but the type that are responsible for our thousand-and-one illiterate literary periodicals. He won't get much, but it'll be more than he got at Batten & Trench's, and he'll see the seedy side of literature, and that'll set him on his mettle. Meanwhile, they've saved twenty pounds for the honeymoon."

There was a chorus of flabbergasted cries. Clym nodded.

"I know—you're not more surprised than I am—and no one knows how they've done it, except themselves. When I asked them, they just grinned, and nudged each other, and said 'Hidden Reserves.' What on earth that means, I don't know."

Mr. Goolan smiled and sighed.

"Tell them I'll marry them, Clym."

"I know they'll be happy," murmured Mrs. Goolan.

"I think so," said Mr. Goolan.

Clym smiled sardonically, and turned to Elaine.

"What do you think, Elaine?"

Elaine was staring at the old vicarage, sunning itself among the whispering wisteria.

"I'd give the rest of my life to have the next ten years of theirs," she said.

Clym glanced obliquely at her, and coughed.

"More tea, Mother, please."

"And now," he added, "I've just got time to catch the five-thirty back, and I'm taking Elaine with me."

He gave no explanation, and when he gave none—none was asked. But as he walked back to the house with Elaine, he said:

"You've got to stay with them, Elaine, till they're married. You'll enjoy it. They've gone quite mad—'economy,' they call it—cannot afford to keep both flat and bed-sitting-room going, so they're moving all his stuff back."

Elaine paused.

"But, Clym—if I turn up—they'll swear I'm casting aspersions on their chastity."

"Don't you believe it!" said Clym, grimly. "Since I got his book placed—they feed out of my hand—do anything I tell them."

"Indeed?—Then, why not tell them to keep on the bed-sitting-room?"

"Eh?—well, when I say 'anything'—I mean, anything in reason."

She laughed.

"In reason!—Why, you're as bad as they are!"

He grinned.

"You don't suppose I'm worrying about their morals?"

It's other people's that I'm afraid of, if it's known they shared the same roof before the nuptials."

Elaine was accepted at the flat. Clym introduced her, and then introduced the subject of marriage, and Mr. Goolan's consent.

Thereafter was pandemonium, during which Clym's arm came off, and was hung up over the mantelpiece.

"You might give it us, when we're married, Clym," said Chris. "We've got no stag's head or elephant's trunk for the hall."

"Perhaps," said Clym. "It's not much use, now Tiny's married."

Two days later a wire came from Poltore.

"Just heard about book and wedding. How absolutely marvellous. All our love. Tiny and Bill."

II

At the end of the first week came a letter from Gattle. Could Chris call at the office? He had got the ten pounds to pay back, but as he had no banking account he could not send a cheque, and feared to trust the notes through the post without registration, and registration was rather expensive.

"Poor little devil!" said Chris. "I can't possibly take it, can I, Babe?"

"It seems a bit beastly."

Elaine buttered a piece of toast thoughtfully.

"Is he the sort of man who you could give ten pounds to, Chris?"

Chris thought for a moment.

"Well, no, he isn't, really. I'm afraid he'd cry again, and then send it through the post."

Elaine nodded.

"You'd better go and get it, Chris dear."

Chris went. But when he saw Gattle, his misgivings returned, and he voiced them. They had met by arrangement outside 101 Unity Square. Gattle was still the servant of Mr. John, and it was dangerous to be friendly with Mr. John's dislikes.

"It's awfully good of you, Barrymore, but I'd rather you took it. It—it's rather difficult to explain, but—er—the kid is doing so well . . . that . . . that, well, I feel I . . . I want to pay ten pounds, just . . . just because it was worth it."

He gulped, and vanished, leaving Chris with ten one pound notes.

The sun streamed down upon him, and he was free—free of copra, hemp, and sugar for ever and ever and ever. The proofs of his book would be with him in ten days' time, and in fourteen days he would be at Poltire, and all the butterflies could dance, and flutter, and settle in the sunlight, and he wouldn't envy one of them.

And then, quite illogically, he felt the wish to see again that office at the top of the stairs behind him—to see again those who had been so decent, and looked after him, when he was such a fool at copra, hemp, and sugar.

He mounted the stairs, passed through the swing-doors, and walked to the counter. They were all there—all except old Turnbull; all at their old desks—all except Ffolliott, and he was sitting where the dead man had sat, and keeping the same books, and going the same way.

At first no one saw him, and he stood staring dreamily, wondering which was reality—all those ledgers, files, and desks, all those bent backs and scratching pens—or Tregasket Cove, with its sea, and its sunshine, and its cave, and its butterflies.

And then Ginn saw him, and wheezed.

"Christ!" he muttered, and slipped off his stool.

"Is Mr. John in, Ginn?—I mean—if he is——"

Ginn croaked and wheezed, and shook his head spasmodically.

"And if he is —— him!" he said, and coughed his veins to the size and consistency of whipcord.

"Heard about your marriage—heard from Goolan & Snaith's clerks—they heard old Goolan talking about it. I've got a present—er—well, I haven't actually got it—but—here—what about the 'Rose and Crown'—just a gargle?—bilious as an owl this morning."

He shuffled back to his desk, and slowly and furtively, in ones and twos, those others who had served with Chris and still served now he was free, came up and shook his hand, and wished him luck, and stole back to their desks—one eye on the glass door marked "Partners," where worked Mr. John MacFadyen, Liberal in politics, Presbyterian by faith, and merchant by the grace of God.

Bolt was dauntless, and flashed a lambent eye at the glass door, as he said:

"You suffered in a good cause, Barrymore."

"Suffered?—What do you mean?"

"You sacrificed your job to get Mrs. Turnbull a pension."

"That wasn't sacrifice—I lost my temper."

Bolt frowned.

"Anyway, it has borne fruit. Mrs. Turnbull has got ten shillings a week for life."

"Good!" said Chris.

"Mind you—in a properly organized State——"

"Quite—only, in a properly organized State there'd be no butterflies."

Bolt stared.

"Why ever not? One of the first acts of a real Socialist State would be the preservation of our indigenous fauna."

"Eh?—er—preservation? Do you mean 'preserved'—"

sort of bottled butterflies?—No, Bolt, you can't do it—butterflies must be free—not bottled."

And then Ginn arrived, and coughed Bolt back on to his stool.

As they passed through the swing-doors, Chris turned his head. He was just in time to see Ffolliott turn his back to copra, hemp, and sugar.

A pint of bitter alleviated Ginn's asthma, and he brought out from under his coat a queer-shaped package in brown paper.

"It was a salad bowl, friend," he muttered, and unwrapped a salad spoon and fork, and a circular band of silver.

"There you are, friend—you'd better take 'em—spoons and forks are always useful and the band's real silver—might come in useful—never know. Here y'are!" He thrust them into Chris's hand and hid his face in his tankard.

"But, Ginn—it's frightfully good of you to give me a present!"

"I'm not giving you one, friend—it's bust. Nearly got it home, too—then met some friends in the local. Dreadful business—hardened cases, all of 'em—they *can* drink—not like me—gifted amateur. But I remembered it—straight! I remembered it, friend—didn't leave it behind—pity I didn't. Got outside—dropped the bloody lot—cut glass, too—particularly after it dropped. Dreadful business!—But I got the band, and the spoon and fork. There they are—and here's the best!"

His face vanished again.

Chris ordered two more, and, after a decent interval, Ginn shook his hand.

"Shall I send Ffolliott along?"

Chris coloured faintly.

"Why do you ask that?"

Ginn wheezed.

"He told me about it—bloody trick!—but there you are—we're as we're made—mine's booze—his is women—and yours is books. Can't be too fussy. And he's sorry—bloody sorry—shall I send him along?"

Chris nodded, and they shook hands again.

"I'll look you up sometime, Ginn."

Gizz gave a wheezy laugh.

"You mean it, friend—and you'll do it—for a bit. But you can't keep in with everyone, and you're out of that bloody hole now, and if you've any sense, you'll stay out. So long! Best o' luck!"

And he was gone, wheezing and coughing, through the swing-doors, back to copra, hemp, and sugar.

Chris waited. Tregasket Cove was very remote now.

And then Ffolliott entered. For an instant he stood there, just on the threshold—tall, well-dressed, good-looking, yet in some indescribable way—shabby.

"What will you have, Ffolliott?"

Ffolliott came forward and leant against the bar. There was no smile of greeting. Just a laconic:

"Half a bitter, thanks."

Chris gave the order, and the glasses arrived.

He raised his.

"Here's luck, Ffolliott!"

There was a faint hint of the old derisive smile.

"In your glass, Barrymore," he said, and tossed off his own at one gulp.

"Will you have one with me?"

He spoke with a slight emphasis on the last word.

"Thanks!" said Chris.

The glasses arrived.

"Here's all the best to you, Barrymore, and . . . if it's permissible—to her!"

He drank at one draught, and turned to go.

“ Er—Ffolliott—why are you in such a hurry? ”

Ffolliott half-turned.

“ What’s there to stop for? We’ve drunk together, and that’s all we’ve ever done.”

“ You were damn decent to me, at a rotten time.”

“ Call it quits, then—for the other. So long—and the best of luck! ”

Chris glanced at him uneasily.

“ You’ve got old Turnbull’s job, haven’t you? ”

A faint, derisive smile hovered about the other’s lips.

“ Oh, yes!—I’ve got his job all right. Wonderful future, eh?—Seedy clerks, smutty stories, and swipes! ”

And he was gone, out through the swing-doors, back to copra, hemp and sugar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE wind blew clean and sweet along the high chalk ridge of the Hog's Back. It was July—early July—July of the ripening corn, and the scarlet carpets of poppies—ripe, mellow July of approaching fulfilment and fecundity.

Clym drove grimly. Elaine blinked at the shining road. And behind them were two who clung to each other as though they were drowning, and sighed, as though they dreamed. On a rug at their feet was the little black kitten, wearing a huge pink bow.

Outside the vicarage, they awoke, flurried and anxious. Babe scrambled out and clutched Elaine's arm. As they passed through the outer door to the paved pathway of the old garden, she said:

"Elaine, listen!—You go and tell them that . . . that they're not to stare at us—you know the sort of look I mean—that ghastly, humid-eyed, 'understanding' look. If they do . . . we'll go straight back and be married at the register office—honest!"

"Babe!" came an urgent whisper, and she swung round. Just behind her was Chris, rather flushed and wild-eyed.

"Keep together, Babe—we've got to face the whole issue. I just caught a glimpse of them under the tree—Tiny and Bill, and Prue and David, and old Crouch——"

Clym arrived with the suitcase.

"Which bedroom, sir?" he said, touching his hat.

"Dump the damn thing here, Clym, and—er—you come with us and talk like the devil—it's too impossible, this pre-nuptial scrutiny."

"Put your little hands in mine, then," said Clym.

They laughed and obeyed, and began to cross the lawn. Elaine took Chris's other hand.

Beneath the sycamore tree was commotion. Mr. and Mrs. Goolan rose from behind the barricade of the tea-table, Prue and David stared, Dr. Crouch chuckled, and Tiny went mad.

She made a blind rush at Chris, and clung to him, quite incoherent. Bill followed more slowly, laughing, and kissed Babe.

"Now then," said Clym, "all join hands."

He raised his voice to a most hideous falsetto:

"Here we come gathering Nuts and May, Nuts and May, Nuts and——" His arm came off.

"How perfectly revolting!" said Elaine.

Dave alone kept his head. Doggedly he leant on the table, steadying it with both hands, his dark eyes fixed anxiously on the cakes and jam and scones, trembling under the heedless impact of people he considered to be quite dangerously insane.

The hubbub lessened gradually, and the pleasant tinkle of cups and saucers mingled with the voices, and the sleepy rustle of the beech trees in the hanger.

Chris and Babe sat side by side, nonchalantly accepting the homage of the married. Mrs. Goolan had dropped a tear in each tea-cup, and was adding milk and sugar.

Dr. Crouch was triumphant.

"I don't know what your book's like—but your future wife has my unqualified approval."

Babe blew him a kiss.

"Don't read the book, Dr. Crouch. You're a bachelor—and it's not a book for bachelors."

Tiny's blue eyes shone.

"Chris darling—is it frightfully . . . ?"

"Appallingly!" interposed Clym.

Mrs. Goolan looked worried, and Clym asked for more tea.

Conversation became general. Chris was looking at Prue. She was fourteen now, and very pretty—with Babe's colouring and Elaine's gentleness. Dave would have Clym's build, Bill's features and Babe's eyes, but his character would be solely and absolutely Dave's.

"Babe!" whispered Chris.

"Yes, darling?"

"Aren't those two kids growing up?"

She nodded.

"Perfectly ghastly, isn't it?"

"And skirts are getting longer."

She turned her head, the arched eyebrows raised.

"Does that fact interest you now?"

Chris swallowed a piece of cake hastily.

"No, darling—er . . . no, darling—not at all!"

After tea there was a general post, and Chris found himself with Dave at the end of the garden.

"Tent!" said Dave brusquely and rather obviously, pointing to a small white tent slung between two poles.

"I'm a Rover now," he added, "and I sleep out every night—get used to roughing it. Killed a mole last night. I'm skinning it—like to see?"

"No, thanks!" said Chris hurriedly.

He eyed the tent thoughtfully.

"Easy to carry?"

Dave smiled scornfully.

"Folds up as small as your hat, and the poles are in sections. Carry the whole lot under your arm."

Chris nodded thoughtfully.

"Dave—can I hire it for a fortnight? I'll pay you a quid for the loan of it."

David frowned.

"Do you want it for this honeymoon business?"

"Yes."

"Right-ho! You can have it, but I shan't charge for it—not for Babe's honeymoon—you can have it buckshee."

"Dave, you're a splendid fellow!"

"Don't get sloppy, Chris," said Dave.

Chris sighed. He felt rather old.

II

Later, the four went down to the river and took the punt, and Babe and Chris paddled, and Tiny and Bill sat facing them, and the beech trees were whispering, and the river sang, and in the fields red cattle moved, and broke the stillness with soft lowings.

"I don't think I've ever been quite so happy in all my life," said Tiny thoughtfully.

"Not in Madeira?" murmured Bill.

The big blue eyes peeped down at the water, and the little fingers dipped and opened to let the ripples gush through.

"Madeira was glorious," she said, thoughtfully, "but this—just now—all of us here . . . well—it's different . . . I don't quite know why it's different, but it is—and they're both marvellous—Madeira and this . . . but this—oh, I don't know—this seems safer, somehow."

And, quite unaccountably, silence fell upon them, broken only by the ripple of the paddles and the sleepy sighing of the beech leaves.

But at the "Anchor" they forgot everything except the three-handled mug.

Ramage was there, and Semphill and Botterill, and others who had known Tiny and Chris in the days of their bondage.

And when the three-handled mug was empty, and they had shaken hands with all, a vow was made that when the honeymoon was over, they would have a reunion, all married,

and all mad, to celebrate the publication of *The Temptations of St. Tony*.

"We must invite the celibates," said Chris.

"The who?" said Bill.

"Clym and Elaine."

"Would you call Clym a celibate?" mused Bill.

"Only if we quarrelled," said Chris.

They went back to the punt again, and meandered upstream in soft brown shadows, with the hanger edged in gold, and the lazy black lines of the rooks streaming home to the elms of St. Cyprian's.

Through the gate of the churchyard they passed, and Chris paused.

"We'll not be long," he said, and took Babe's arm.

The married went, leaving the single alone.

They waited, watching the two figures moving among the tombstones, till the door in the old wall swallowed them.

"Babe—I want to go to the place where we first met."

She glanced at him quickly, and smiled.

The tomb was in shadow from the church, and the gargoyles were losing colour and stood out in humped blackness against the glowing sky. A new stone showed, very white among those that time had softened.

Chris read the inscription:

"THE REV. J. BARRYMORE, M.A.

Vicar of St. Cyprian's,

Okebourne.

1890 to 1928.

God was his Friend."

He turned away and glanced at his mother's grave.

"It's been awfully well looked after, Babe—who did it?"

"Elaine. Poor old Elaine—she's rather fond of graves, since Tim was killed."

There was a pause.

"Life's damnably unfair," said Chris. "It seems to give with both hands to some people, and snatch from others everything they value most."

He caught her to him suddenly.

"Do you realize how lucky we've both been, Babe?"

"Do I, Chris darling?—Why, it was just the sheerest luck we ever met!"

And they kissed in the shadow of the church wall, between the new white gravestone and the old.

"Chris," she said suddenly, "they must have loved once, mustn't they?"

"I suppose Mother did, but I can't believe that he ever loved anyone."

She looked down at his mother's grave, and sighed.

"And now it doesn't matter a little bit, whether they loved or hated."

He glanced at her quickly, and then he picked her up and set her down on the top stone of the eighteenth-century tomb, where she had first seen him in the clear sunshine of that early morning in mid-May. And he put his arms round her, and looked at her—the blue eyes half serious, half whimsical.

"It does matter, dear—out of their dead bones was I made, to love you—and love you I will, darling—always—till I am as they are now."

And suddenly he seemed to her to waver mistily before her eyes, and she bent her head and kissed him, and pressed his head against her breasts.

Within the dark tower of St. Cyprian's, the old clock gathered up its strength and struck, and all the hanger pealed in echo, and all the valley rang.

He lifted her down, and tugged out his handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, and smiled, and whispered:

"Darling—we are getting frightfully emotional, aren't we?"

III

Supper was a febrile meal. The wedding was to be at eight, for they must catch the ten o'clock train from Oasting-ton Junction; and as the wedding was to be at eight, they all had only the few hours left of one day in which to talk and think about the next.

Clym and Elaine sat together, Tiny and Bill facing them. Prue and Dave had gone to bed. Dr. Crouch had kissed Babe and winded Chris with a blow on the back, and gone. The french windows were open, and the night was warm and dark, and the moths came and danced to them, and the owls called ghostly greeting from the shadowy trees.

But they heeded neither moths nor owls. The marriage and the book shared the honours of the table-talk.

The proofs were produced, and everyone scrambled to look at them; and Babe's drawings were passed round, and everyone thought them marvellous.

Elaine touched Clym's foot.

"Poor old Bill—he looks a bit out of it, doesn't he?"

"Every little dog has its day," murmured Clym.

"I shall so look forward to reading it, Chris dear," said Mrs. Goolan.

"Oh, but *you* mustn't read it, Mrs. Goolan," said Chris hurriedly.

"Why not, dear?"

Clym intervened.

"It's just a little 'ultra,' Mother."

"I don't care if it is," said Mrs. Goolan. "If Chris wrote it—I shall read it."

Tiny looked rather wistful.

"Of course, Bill's a most marvellous solicitor," she said.

Bill laughed.

"Give the high-brows homage to-day, Tiny. Chris has had a rough passage, and I'm delighted he's brought it off at last."

"Good old Bill!" cried Babe.

Tiny stood up.

"Bill's a darling, and—we're . . . we're just as clever as you . . . really—shut up, Billy darling! . . . I will speak. And look here, all of you—I can't paint, and Billy can't write, but we've done something just as marvellous."

Bill groaned, and closed his eyes.

"I don't care!" exclaimed Tiny, blue eyes wildly happy. "I will tell them! Listen, chaps . . . I . . . I'm going to have the most marvellous baby!"

Pandemonium broke out, and resolved itself finally into one word:

"When?"

Tiny began to count with the tips of her fingers, on the tip of her little nose.

"Tiny—please!" muttered Bill.

"Well, darling—we're not quite sure, are we?" She began again:

"April, May, June, July——"

She smiled radiantly.

"Oh, chaps—it'll be here in November, and it's going to be called 'Chris'!"

Chris rose and bowed.

"Supposing Chris is a girl?"

"Well, Chris darling—then, of course, it'll be called 'Babe.'"

Babe rose and bowed.

"Supposing it's twins?"

Tiny clasped her hands devoutly, blue eyes raised, Madonna-like, to heaven.

"Why!—if it's twins—why, it'll be Tiny and Chris—all over again."

The discussion was cut short by Mrs. Goolan, who began to weep thankfully.

"My dear!" said Mr. Goolan, patting her arm.

"Don't stop me, Tom," she sobbed, cheerfully. "I'm so happy—I shall be a Granny at last!"

Everyone rose and comforted her in her cheerfulness.

The proofs and the drawings were forgotten, until Clym rescued them.

"Elaine!" he murmured.

"Yes?"

"Which is more important—'proofs' or 'progeny'?"

"That depends on whether you're a man or a woman," said Elaine.

The night was so warm that they all sat in the garden under the sycamore tree—all except Mr. Goolan, who took his chair to the veranda, and Mrs. Goolan, who took her tears and hopes to bed.

The figure of the little clergyman was just visible in the diffused light from the french windows.

"Just a minute, Babe!" whispered Chris, and ran across the lawn.

Mr. Goolan heard him, saw him mount the veranda, stand for an instant in the light, and sidle towards him.

"Beautiful night, Chris?"

"Wonderful, sir."

He sat down on the tiled floor, in the shadow of the clergyman's chair.

"Mr. Goolan!"

"Yes, Chris?"

There was a pause, and a jerky voice said:

"I—I'd like to thank you most awfully, for—for all

you've done for Tiny and me, and particularly for—for letting me marry Babe."

There was another pause. In the darkness, Mr. Goolan smiled.

"Is that quite modern? Parental consent to marriage is surely a little old-fashioned."

Chris laughed.

"People like you and Mrs. Goolan are never old-fashioned."

Mr. Goolan echoed the laugh.

"And that is really quite the nicest thing that anyone has ever said to me!"

"And it's true, Mr. Goolan—and—I want to tell you that . . . Babe'll be quite all right with me. I know I'm a bit young—but I'm not so young as I was before I went to Batten & Trench, and—well, anyway, she'll be quite all right with me—she will, really!"

"I'm sure she will, Chris."

Through the darkness, Clym's voice sounded:

"Time, gentlemen, please!"

Mr. Goolan laughed quietly.

"Run along, Chris!"

Beneath the tree, they greeted him eagerly, and gave him his chair again, and Babe returned to his knee.

"And what has the Infant Samuel been saying to the High Priest?" said Clym.

Chris pressed Babe's knee.

"Clym," he answered, "I've been following the advice of the Arch-Pharisee. I've been showing your father the courtesy I asked of him."

Babe laughed exultantly.

"Hold that one, Clym!"

Clym held it.

"Grand Slam, and all the honours to you, Chris!" he said

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE old Ford van stopped.

"You run and get the front door open, Babe, while I get the gear out."

She jumped out and ran up the path.

"That was all, sir, wasn't it?" said the driver, eyeing the suitcase and the nondescript bundle lying beside it on the dusty road.

"Yes, that's all, thanks, Reddle," said Chris, and dived his hand into his pocket.

"Thank you, sir—much obliged, sir!"

The man climbed back into his seat, and the Ford rattled away down the steep hill to Poltore village.

Chris picked up the bundle and the suitcase, kicked open the gate and hurried to the open door.

She caught the suitcase from him and carried it into the front room. Then she ran to the windows and opened them wide, and let in the sweet soft wind from the western sea. The front door closed gently—almost stealthily. She turned slowly. He stood just in the doorway. There was no sound in all the world, save the faint, fitful sighing of the sea.

"Chris, darling—don't look at me . . . like that!"

He took a step towards her and she came to meet him. And then she paused, and her cheeks were hot, and the black eyes flickered, faintly timid.

"Babe, darling . . . you're . . . you're not frightened?"

"No, darling—oh, no . . . I'm not . . . it's only . . . I'm not frightened, darling . . . not a bit!"

She ran to him, and he held her, and pressed his face to hers, and felt her cheeks burning.

"Darling . . . what is it?—You're trembling all over."

"I'm . . . I'm not, Chris darling . . . I mean . . . If I am, you . . . you oughtn't to mention it."

Through the open windows came the humming of the bees.

"Chris . . . you're trembling too!"

"I know . . . isn't it . . . ghastly . . . ?"

And their lips met, trembling.

And suddenly he laughed, awkwardly.

"Let's make a cup of tea!"

They ran into the kitchen and put the kettle on, and while it sang, they talked incessantly, hardly knowing what they said. She opened the window, and the smell of the peat on Roughter Moor set them both breathing deeply, and laughing exultantly in the glory of their earthly paradise.

They took their cups to the front room, and sipped, and feasted their eyes on the sea—deep, tranquil blue where the line of the cliff ended—pale silver on the hazy horizon.

"It's four-thirty, darling," said Chris suddenly, "and we simply mustn't waste another second indoors."

She jumped up.

"Bathing costumes, darling—instantly!"

They ran madly upstairs to the landing, where the two doors adjoined—doors of the two rooms they had always used.

"I won't be a minute, Chris darling—nor must you—promise!"

She glanced at him, black eyes supplicating. And, slowly, her cheeks coloured, and the long lashes hid her eyes.

"Chris—of course—I forgot!"

There was silence for an instant, and she peeped up.

"Are we to . . . ought we . . . I mean—shall we change together, Chris?"

Again was silence.

"Babe, darling . . . if . . . if we do . . . darling . . . it must be in Tregasket Cove."

She blinked, and nodded, and vanished; and the door closed, with a faint rattle of the handle.

They met again in the front room, and looked at each other shyly.

"Ah! that's better, darling," he whispered, and caught her by the hands and kissed her, and drew back, still holding her hands.

"How white your thighs have got, Babe!"

She peeped down, and nodded.

"Sunburn soon goes, darling—mind?"

"I think I rather like it better, and . . ."

They kissed again.

They managed to eat some bread and butter, and a slice of cake each, and drank four cups of tea; and then they left the house, with tent pole balanced between them on their shoulders. Beneath hung Dave's tent, bulging with everything they needed till the next day dawned.

II

Poltire Point was gushing foam, and *Jane* was curtsying gracefully, and the oars creaked in the thole-pins, and the two young bodies bent in time, and the sun burned down on a sea all blue.

And out of the sea rose Tregasket Cap—molten black in the sunshine, with whispering foam about its base, and the gulls in long, white, drowsy lines upon its rifts and crevices. The boat drifted, and the oars dripped little jewels into a sapphire sea. The wind had gone, and the waves were too

languid to curl and break, and slid sleepily by, lapping the cliffs with little gusts and gurglings, to spill themselves in drowsy foam upon the yellow sand.

The small black head turned, and she peeped at him over her bare shoulder—lips hidden, eyes big, and dark, and worshipful.

“Just whereabouts is the place, darling?”

He turned, and pointed to the shore.

“Just there, darling—to the left of our old monolith—this side of the cascade—where that patch of gorse is.”

She stared across the sea and nodded quickly.

“Oh, I see!—Oh, Chris—what a wonderful place!”

A kind wave followed and helped them, and sent *Jane* sliding up the beach, and shrank away again, leaving her churning the sand.

They jumped out, splashing through the shallow water, and carried the anchor between them, and ran, laughing, and dug it deep in the warm sand.

Tremelet had told them their site was safe, but, being unromantic, he had failed to tell them how admirably Nature had convulsed herself to fashion out of the iron rock that level plateau for their sole use.

The ascent was easy—a succession of natural steps that led up a distance of some twenty feet—and at the top was smooth turf, walled in by the cliff on all sides save seawards, and fringed with gorse bushes and backed by a sea of whispering bracken.

It took them quite a while to unload the cargo, and then they set about gathering bracken to make their night's soft bed. Busily they worked, in the bright sunshine, carrying great armfuls of the fragrant leaves, and pausing to kiss, and to laugh when the ravished fronds tickled their cheeks, as their lips met in a bower of tender green.

It was nearly seven before all was finished, and the small white tent rose from among the gorse and bracken.

But they were not hungry, so they went to sea again. She sat cross-legged on the green cushion, with the little green sunshade over her shoulder, and Chris rowed unenthusiastically, and they kept looking at each other and looking away, at the sky, and the sea, and at the shadows creeping stealthily into the cove as the sun stole away into the west. And always their eyes peeped back to the shore, where the small tent showed as a spot of white against the face of the towering cliff.

III

Upon the plateau was sunlight still—soft sunlight, that warmed without burning.

Babe knelt just inside the tent, slim thighs touching, little hands busy passing out plates and forks.

And then, as she fumbled in Dave's haversack, she gave a little cry of surprise.

"Look, Chris!—Dave must have pinched it—it's Father's, really."

She held out a quaint, silver, eighteenth-century hour-glass. He examined it curiously.

"Why—it's an old sermon-glass, Babe, like they used to stand on the edge of the pulpit, so that the preacher knew how much longer he'd got to keep it up."

He turned the glass over in his hand. There was only a trickle of sand left in one globe, and, idly, he let it slip through.

She watched him—sitting back on her heels, hands resting on her thighs.

He set the glass down on the turf against a single stem of bracken.

"Darling," he whispered, "when all the sand's slipped through—you'll change into a little yellow butterfly!"

She coloured softly, and blinked her eyes.

"You too, darling!" she murmured.

He knelt before her and drew her close, so that they knelt together, warm from shoulders to knees.

"Babe . . . how marvellously soft . . . your . . . your thighs feel against mine!"

There was silence, and a faint sigh.

"Chris, darling . . . you've made me all shaky again!"

The shadow of Tregasket Cap crept over the crimsoning sea, and the cove grew cool, and lines of white foam crept whispering along the cliff base, and sighed into silence upon the ashen sand.

"Babe, darling—you've eaten nothing!"

She shivered, and pressed her cheek against his.

"I . . . I can't . . . Chris."

A breath of wind stirred the bracken, and against the glowing sky the hour-glass stood in clear-edged outline, and the sand was slipping through.

"Babe, darling . . . why do you tremble so?"

"I . . . I can't help it, Chris darling . . ."

A great black shadow touched the plateau and crept stealthily towards the tent. The sea was spilled wine, the foam ghostly white.

Below the dark rim of the horizon, the sunken sun shot fire into the sky, and the hour-glass showed, tenuous—an outline of fine, delicate strokes, upon a crimson background. The globe above was almost empty, and the globe below was almost filled.

"Chris darling . . . how slowly . . . the sand trickles!"

A wave rolled into the cove and broke, and slid silently to sleep upon the sandy shore.

"It's too long, Babe . . . an hour."

The bracken rustled, and the warm breath of the night was sweet with the scent of the gorse.

"Oh, Chris . . . your lips . . . little warm velvet cushions."

"Darling . . ."

"Chris—I . . . I . . . oh Chris!"

"My darling . . . I'll be ever so gentle . . ."

Upon the dark grass she lay like a fallen statue, and kneeling he breathed between her lips, and the statue quickened and sighed, and moved pale arms and was lifted up and hidden away from the eyes of the first faint stars.

And the sea crept whispering to the shore, and broke, and sighed away into silence.

* * * *

Over the glimmering waters of the cove two little butterflies fluttered and dipped. But the sun was gone, and the day was done, and the little yellow wings were tired. And the bracken rustled and called, and up from the sea the little shapes fluttered, tinged with a ghostly light. About the plateau they danced and fluttered in little circles above the small white tent. Then they dipped, and sank, and settled upon a single fern frond, and folded their wings like little yellow sunshades, and fell asleep, side by side, and swayed as the fern swayed above an empty hour-glass.

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